WHY THE PAST MATTERS: STUDYING PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

*I. Chipkin and S. Meny-Gibert
Public Affairs Research Institute
University of the Witwatersrand

ABSTRACT

The state of the public sector in South Africa is heavily influenced by particular histories of state administration related to the legacy of apartheid and the nature of the political transition to democracy. We suggest, however, that there is a paucity of scholarly work in the discipline of Public Administration which takes into account this legacy and the manner in which the public sector is embedded in broader social, political and economic relations. This has had significant consequences for the particular models of public administration adopted. In making our case for the importance of applying a historical lens to the study of the public sector, we draw on research on the incorporation of the former Bantustans into provincial government administration in South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

This article argues that the state of the public sector in South Africa is heavily influenced by particular histories of public administration related to the legacy of apartheid and the nature of the political transition to democracy. While this theme is explored in a number of scholarly texts in other fields, there is a paucity of work in the discipline of Public Administration which takes into account this legacy, especially in relation to thinking about appropriate models of public sector management in the current period.

FROM DESCRIPTIVE TO ANALYTICAL RESEARCH ON THE STATE

In 1991 a number of scholars from the discipline of Public Administration, anti-apartheid activists recently returned from exile, and those sympathetic to the democratic struggle in South Africa met at a conference venue in Magaliesberg, just outside Johannesburg. The focus of the Mount Grace Conference deliberations was the character of the post-apartheid public service, the nature of appropriate public sector training for the new administration, and the state of the public administration discipline that was to serve it.
In reflecting on the state of the discipline, participants argued that the current theory, teaching and practice of Public Administration were in crisis. Specifically, teaching and practice was ‘too descriptive: lacking sufficient analytical, explanatory and predictive techniques; …reductionist: restricting and reifying Public Administration to one view of the administrative processes only…’ (Cameroon & Milne, 2009:386). Delegates resolved that “more rigorous scientific analysis, explanation and prediction of governmental and administrative phenomena supplementing their mere description is necessary. An open and critical debate on explanatory models for this purpose should be encouraged…” (Cameroon & Milne, 2009:386).

Yet there has been no scholarly renewal in the field since then. Based on an overview of journal articles from 1994 to 2006 in two prominent academic journals in the field of public administration in South Africa, (Journal of Public Administration and Administratio Publica), Cameron and Milne conclude that there was “very little theory development in the discipline”. Further, “most research was descriptive and normative and there was very little testing of validity or causality” (Cameroon & Milne, 2009:391).

Cameron and Milne suggest that the poverty of research on the public sector, at least in the discipline of Public Administration, is linked to the ‘move towards Public Management in the discipline’ which leads to ‘a narrow focus on skills and techniques at the expense of research’ (Cameroon & Milne, 2009:293). The reasons for the paucity of analytical work on public sector institutions are complex, and deserve to be addressed in a dedicated paper. Two additional factors are worth noting, however. In the first place, public administration/public management generally, but especially in South Africa, is often positioned as a vocational pursuit such that the importance of research and scholarship is downplayed. This has been compounded by the entanglement of public sector research and consulting in many of the universities that has often blunted the critical edge of such work.

There has, thus, been an overconcentration in the public administration literature on pedagogical concerns or on the description of administrative and management techniques needed for a post-apartheid public service. While a discussion of these techniques and approaches is of value, there is little attempt to discuss them in relation to the form of the South African state or the character of the South African political economy. Yet these factors may be crucial in understanding why some initiatives work and others do not. There is a danger, in other words, of essentialism and/or reifying the administrative system in thinking about the performance of departments and agencies.
A key deficit in this literature is the lack of attention paid to the histories of public sector organisations. Von Holdt’s study of Baragwanath hospital is a rare exception in this regard (Von Holdt, 2010). More usually, public administration scholars pay too little attention to the formal and informal norms and networks within organisations and to the nature of state-society relationships. Further, public administration scholars, though this is true of political scientists too, have paid little attention to how organisations emerge, the models that inform their establishment, to how they have changed over time, in terms of their structure, their leadership and the personnel that staff them, and how this influences how power is exercised, how decisions are made and what gets done.

Supporting the development of an analytical and historical lens is key to both the discipline (scholarship) and practice of public administration, particularly in training a cadre of skilled strategists and management in the public sector. Without it, we cannot practice the ‘art of the possible’.

POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

For more than twenty years the field of African studies has been reinvigorated by a host of scholarly works interested in the character of African politics. Of particular interest has been the failure of democracy in the period after independence to understand the institutional ‘crisis’ of the state as well as the relative decline of African economies from the 1960s. By the beginning of the millennium a consensus was beginning to emerge among historians that the ‘the nature of the contemporary African state is in large part due to the legacy of the colonial era’ (Haynes, 2002). Crawford-Young cast this relationship in zoological terms: “in metamorphosis the caterpillar becomes butterfly without losing its inner essences” (Crawford Young, 2004:2). In a similar vein, the colonial state becomes a postcolonial one while retaining its original DNA.

The colonial state during its phase of construction in most cases created entirely novel institutions of domination and rule. Although we commonly describe the independent polities as ‘new states’, in reality they were successors to the colonial regime, inheriting its structures, its quotidian routines and practices, and its more hidden normative theatre of governance. (Crawford Young, 2004:15)

The value of postcolonial literature for the study of the public sector in South Africa is that it helps us to situate elements of contemporary political phenomena (corruption, neo-patrimonialism, institutional failure, for example) in the longue durée of the colonial state. The extent to which the ‘original DNA’ of the apartheid administration has been retained has varied by region and by institution. Take,
for example, the provincial governments which incorporated former homeland administrations. Profound changes in conceptions of who constitutes the country’s citizenry, changes in the leadership of staff managing public institutions and so on have produced a range of new institutional norms and values. These organisations have been subject to significant changes in the structure and formal *modus operandi* post 1994. At the same time there has been a continuity of informal structure and process – in particular a continuity in the way in which bureaucracy is embedded in social relations at odds with the ideal of an impartial Weberian state.

These formal changes in structure and policy took too little cognisance of the enduring nature of the apartheid administration and the manner in which it was embedded in broader social relations. In making our case for the importance of an historical analysis we will now explore the integration of the former homelands into the new provincial set-up. We will suggest that the uneven character of public sector performance at provincial level is partly a function of their relationship to former homeland administrations and administrators. This is likely true of local governments too. The viability and the fortunes of post-apartheid, local and provincial governments owes a lot to the history of their emergence, in particular, to the process of integration of former black and white local authorities.

**ADMINISTRATION OF THE FORMER HOMELANDS**

By the end of apartheid, the territory of South Africa was governed and administered by an astonishingly complex puzzle of governments, agencies, departments and legislatures. Over and above the Dr Seuss-like arrangements of the Tri-Cameral parliament – three houses of parliament, a President’s Council and the myriad of white and black local authorities – the homelands (Lebowa, QwaQwa, Bophuthatswana, KwaZulu, KaNgwane, Transkei and Ciskei, Gazankulu, Venda and KwaNdebele), collectively, consisted of 14 legislatures and 151 departments (Picard, 2005:293).

Homeland administrations grew quickly between 1965 and 1970. By 1971, 3 581 black Africans served in the Transkei civil service, and an additional 2 000 chiefs in administrative roles. By 1980, the Bophuthatswana public service had reached 55 000 employees. In 1990 there were 197 455 public servants in the self-governing territories and another 438 599 personnel in the nominally independent states. By 1992, the civil service in the homeland areas had swollen to 638 599 people, or 16% of their economically active populations, and an even higher proportion of their middle classes (Picard 200:301). The bloated system was due in part to the duplication in setting up administration for each of the homelands.
In contrast, there were only 60 352 officials directly employed in apartheid South Africa’s official four provinces (the Transvaal, the Orange Free State, Natal and the Cape) in 1993, and only 349 832 officials in the entire apartheid-era bureaucracy, including at central, provincial and local government levels. Collectively, homeland officials were the least qualified and experienced. White senior managers often consisted of those officials that had been transferred from the South African civil service because they were below grade. These civil servants were joined by black officials, usually drawn from the ranks of the chefferie (or traditional system), who were prized for their obedience and loyalty rather than their education and competence (Picard, 2005:297). For the rest, homeland administrations consisted of tens of thousands of black, poorly trained subalterns, either performing menial or basic administrative tasks (Picard, 2005:295).

Before 1980, there were no trained black personnel working as senior managers in the Bantustans. Bantu education and the limited opportunity for black South Africans to obtain tertiary education supplied few skilled managers to the homeland administrations. Further, the nurturing of a skilled, black bureaucratic class was a perceived threat to the apartheid state, and to the privilege of the white civil service. In the 1980s, apartheid reformers attempted to deal with the major human resources deficit in the homelands, and counter the perception that increased black employment was a threat to the survival of the state. Their efforts were unsuccessful. Yet the façade of the homelands as independent states had to be maintained. This required the active collaboration of local political elites (Picard, 2005:297).

As the apartheid state progressively ceded power to the homelands, so the Bantu Authority System provided more opportunities for the accumulation of wealth to the traditional elites as well as to senior bureaucrats and South African companies. Significantly, chiefs received official salaries and occupied strategic positions that often fused judicial and administrative functions – in what Mahmood Mamdani famously described as a ‘clenched fist’ of indirect rule (Mamdani, 1996). Access to land and control over licenses and the granting of concessions, in particular, created huge opportunities for corruption.

In a historical analysis of corruption in South Africa since the Transvaal Republic, John Hyslop, drawing on Roger Southall (1982), notes that, “homeland government became a by-word for corruption and incompetence. Official extortion in relation to everything from the issuing of trading permits upwards was rife. Homeland leaders presided over massive patronage networks” (Hyslop, 2005:783). Nepotism flourished. In KwaZulu-Natal, for example, those with royal lineage had privileged access to the civil service (Picard, 2005:297). In short, the very organisation of the homeland system, as well as the reason for its emergence, discouraged the establishment of predictable, impartial and rule-driven bureaucracies.
The resultant, ineffectual state of the bureaucracy (lacking in technical and managerial capacity, often corrupt, and lacking in adherence to formal procedures), further entrenched a culture of patronage. Individuals and communities turned to accessing state resources by the drawing of personal networks within the bureaucracy and traditional leadership (Gibbs, 2011). In this context political brokers emerged (some of them traditional leaders), with later consequences for the manner in which local government politics played out in post-apartheid South Africa.

**TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY**

At the time of South Africa’s transition to democracy there were nearly 650,000 homeland officials, often with rudimentary qualifications, formed and apprenticed in dysfunctional administrations that operated less according to standing orders and impersonal processes and more through patronage and personal rule. What was to be done with these officials in the democratic period?

While the ANC had a number of highly educated and trained leaders, few had experience in running a modern state, and certainly insufficient numbers to populate the administration. Further, argues Hyslop, the ANC now required the political support of the black middle-class administrators of the former homelands (Hyslop, 2005). The homeland elite had strong bargaining power in the negotiations of the early nineties (Picard, 2005:301), becoming a strange ally to the white apartheid civil service in seeking job security in the new administration.

The dilemma facing the ANC was compounded by the situation in the public service outside the homelands. In 1992, a survey of senior public servants in South Africa showed that 80% of them were Afrikaans-speaking and 77% supported the National Party (Picard, 2005:302). There were only two black persons in senior management (at the lowest grade) in the Department of Finance. Even the Department of Development Planning, which was in charge, in part, of the provision of public goods to black South Africans, had only six black senior managers. All of them were Indian (Picard, 2005:302). How could such a staff complement be trusted to execute the new democratic government’s mandate?

Homeland officials were, thus, largely retained when they were merged into the new provincial governments of the democratic period. Black homeland officials were progressively promoted as the ANC administration privileged affirmative action and demographic change in the transformation of the apartheid-era public service. ‘After 1994,’ Picard writes, “affirmative action needs were quickly met through the integration of homeland administrators into the new provincial
system. Testing and the establishment of qualification criteria defined by the government, which many advocates of civil service reform saw as necessary in order to address the past limitations of the homeland system, were simply not implemented” (Picard, 2005:307).

CONTEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

There were several damaging consequences of this arrangement. In the first place, apartheid-era corruption continued. John Hyslop writes, for example, that ‘most central government departments have shown a fair degree of functionality in the new era, and corruption has been relatively contained’ (Hyslop, 2005:785). This, he suggests, has not been true of the nine new provincial administrations. “Here there was a clear correlation between the level of systematic corruption [in the new provincial administrations] and the degree of administrative continuity with the old homeland administrations” (Hyslop 2005:785).

Second, the service delivery improvements that were supposed to follow from rationalisation and integration did not occur. This has had further consequences for the nature of state-society relationships. In post-apartheid South Africa a far wider set of groups in the former homelands now comes into contact with the state (Gibbs, 2011). Yet, the state continued, in the 1990s, to be ineffectual in providing services to a broad base of rural citizens in areas such as the Transkei. Gibbs argues that, coupled with the political culture of patronage entrenched under the homeland system, local ANC politicians at municipal level have stepped in to play a role in political and economic brokering for poor, local communities. With expanded, development projects in the rural areas implemented in the 2000s facilitated by a healthier fiscus, further space opened up for local officials to play this role. While this has provided a number of impoverished communities with access to resources, it has perpetuated neo-patrimonial styles of politics in these areas (Gibbs, 2011).

In the early years of the transition from apartheid to the democratic dispensation, the focus was on political settlement and stability. Understandably perhaps, less attention was paid to the way in which new institutions of government would be developed and structured, and how these changes might deal with the legacy of the homeland system.

A 1992 planning document written by Job Mokgoro pointed to the problems that the new Government of National Unity would inherit from the homelands. Mokgoro noted that, ‘little could be done with the homeland civil services because no preparation had been made for training and retraining homeland bureaucrats’ (Mokgoro, unpublished paper, in Picard, 2005:299).
AN AHISTORICAL CRITIQUE

Since coming to power in 1994, however, the ANC government has been a forceful agent on the post-apartheid scene. This is especially true in respect of the reform of the South African public service. Curiously however, the challenge of public service reform in South Africa was not referenced to the issue discussed above. Instead, minds were focused on something else. In line with broader international trends in public administration, especially in Britain, the United States and New Zealand, a number of public sector reform initiatives in South Africa were shaped by New Public Management (NPM) thinking. Proponents of NPM sought to change what they saw as bureaucratic, law-driven administrations into an innovative and adaptive public service that could respond to increasingly globalised and complex societies.

Fitzgerald, for example, suggested that the apartheid state could be characterised as a, ‘bureaucratic, law-driven, hierarchical, multi-layered, departmentally fragmented, inward-oriented, racial Oligarchy’ (Fitzgerald, 2005:512) – characteristics NPM sought to change. To what extent was this analysis apposite for the former homelands – now largely incorporated into the provincial administrations of the Eastern Cape, North West, Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal? We have seen how the bureaucracy functioned more through informal procedure and networks than a rule-driven hierarchy. Further, as noted by Wendy Ngoma in a study of education provision in the Eastern Cape, NPM “never questions the issue of skills and competencies. Rather, it assumes managers have the training and the required competencies to lead and direct change” (Ngoma, 2007:235).

NPM ‘techniques’ were neither applied wholesale nor uncritically by the ANC government, especially in relation to its political roots in ‘neoliberal’ critiques of social democracy. In South Africa, however, its adoption took too little cognisance of recent history, especially the nature of former homeland administrations. Further, how could public sector reforms (such as an increasing focus on the skill and discretion of public sector management) be meaningfully embedded in these provinces?

To what extent have new public management approaches interrupted apartheid-era logics or merely unwittingly reproduced them? For example, the introduction of NPM in the environment just described may have exacerbated corruption and poor service delivery by giving increasing autonomy to leaders implicated in patrimonial networks. Picard notes that “focus in the provinces should have been on organisational development and capacity building, particularly amongst former homeland leaders” (Picard, 2005:308). Yet, even the apparently neutral interven-
tion of ‘capacity building’ and skills development may be highly political, as Von Holdt shows in a discussion of health provision in South African public hospitals (Von Holdt, 2010:12).

Furthermore, the incorporation of former Bantustans into the post-apartheid state created an unfortunate and worrying association. Affirmative action in the public sector was seen to coincide with the deterioration of public service. In the same way that the HIV/AIDS epidemic coincided with the end of apartheid, establishing a shocking association between freedom and death (Posel, 2005 & Steinberg, 2008), so the deterioration of the quality of public service apparently coincided with the inclusion of blacks as public service managers and officials.

It is little wonder, therefore, that in the current situation, questions of skill and training in the public service have become so politicised, resulting, as Von Holdt shows, in respect of the nursing profession, in an ‘ambivalence to skill’ (Von Holdt, 2010). This politicisation is likely a major obstacle to the implementation of minimum, compulsory qualifications for public servants in South Africa and an associated national school of training to provide them. Yet, racist charges of black incompetence and the defensive reactions they meet in government lead us away from one of the key issues.

What would have been an appropriate model of governance for the provinces, in relation to their recent histories – histories largely defined by a deficit in skills produced by the apartheid logic and by neo-patrimonial networks? This is the key challenge, made harder still by political compromises in the early years of transition. Yet the focus on ‘bureaucracy’ as the main problem distracts us from this history. To the extent that analysis was undertaken in the discipline of public administration, it lacked appropriate historical and sociological depth. As a result it fixated on the bureaucratic character of administrations instead of engaging with a broader body of literature on the nature of the political economy and the way in which administrations were embedded in social networks.

The failure to think beyond normative arguments, or beyond “rational inputs and outputs paradigms” (Ngoma, 2007:ii), namely how the public sector should function, has led policy makers away from providing answers suited to South Africa’s particular history.

**CONCLUSION**

This article has briefly presented the history of the incorporation of the former homeland administrations into provincial government in support of a broader argument. We have suggested that the state of the public sector in South Africa today must be understood in light of the particular and largely exceptional history of
both the pre-apartheid state and the transition from apartheid. It has suggested that constraints, especially in provincial and local government, are further related to the unwitting effects of compromises made during the original constitutional settlement. What ruptures and continuities, for example, have been created in the contemporary South African public sector (organisational culture, norms and values, for example) with the administration of the pre-apartheid state?

The adoption of a greater historical lens has consequences not only for our analysis of the public sector, but for the practice of public administration. How are we accounting for the differentiated experiences of provincial and local government for example? Inquiry into the performance of institutions cannot simply be reduced to questions of leadership or to techniques of organisation. We have suggested that insufficient attention has been paid, both in policy design and in writing on the state and public administration, to the history of the South African public sector, and in particular to the specific histories of the institutions it comprises.

The article has argued for a form of scholarship and analysis of government that pays attention to the recent history of the country and its institutions. The failure to do so means the borrowing of models and solutions (best practice), for example, largely drawn from other people’s histories and circumstances.

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*Ivor Chipkin* is the Director of the Public Affairs Research Institute (PARI) and an Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences at the University of the Witwatersrand. Ivor has published widely on questions of government and governance in South Africa as well as on topics ranging from democratic theory, through questions of national identity and citizenship to urban change in post-Apartheid South Africa. In 2007 he published *Do South Africans Exist? Nationalism, Democracy and the Identity of ‘the People’* with Wits University Press. He holds a doctorate from the Ecole Normale Superieure in France and is a Senior Associate Member of St Antony’s college at Oxford University. ichipkin@pari.org.za

*Sarah Meny-Gibert* is the Research Manager at the Public Affairs Research Institute (PARI), an institute affiliated to the University of the Witwatersrand undertaking research on government and the public sector in South Africa. As an applied researcher, Sarah Meny-Gibert has conducted research in a broad range of sectors, including higher education and skills development, school education, housing and human settlements, and more. She has published on the topic of public administration as well as access to education, and undertook a brief stint as a lecturer in the Department of Sociology at the University of the Witwatersrand. She holds a Masters degree in sociology from the University of the Witwatersrand. sarahmg@pari.org.za