

Technical Possibilities and Political Imperatives in
70 years of Administrative Reform

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Summary

The 1920's Kemmerer missions initiated 70 years of trial and error in improving Latin American public administration. Different approaches with different origins were applied individually and regionally, generating an equal variety of explanations for poor results. Reform actions in mainland Latin America are examined historically and the technical approach to change that has guided national and international agencies is shown to be questionable.

Introduction

In November 1996, the Centro Latinoamericano de Administración para el Desarrollo (CLAD) held its 1st Interamerican Congress on the topic of State Reform and Public Administration. For most of the invited speakers and the more than seven hundred researchers and practitioners who had come from all over the region to present their ideas, the linking of “public administration” with “state reform” in the title of the event was natural. There was to be little questioning of the predominant view that government effectiveness in relation to urgent social and developmental issues should be framed within the equally urgent need to re-size and re-dimension the state. Virtually without exception, Latin American countries are at present engaged in processes of State Reform. Programs under the title of “Modernization of the State” and “Public Sector Modernization” are being financed throughout the region by the World Bank and, between 1990-1995, The Interamerican Development Bank (IDB) approved some 100 or more programs in which “Strengthening” and Reform of the State” components were present.

Earlier in 1996, the General Assembly of the United Nations had adopted a revised resolution on public administration and development¹. Amongst the twenty clauses that form the resolution, the UN invited the Bretton Woods institutions to assist member states involved in economic restructuring programs to pursue national policies aimed at improving the development and management of their human resources; in addition, it oriented its own agencies to focus activities on, amongst others, strengthening government capacity for policy development, administrative restructuring, civil service reform, human resource development and public administration training.

The theme of State Reform is also present in countless local seminars and country based public administration journals, supported in discussion by academics, practitioners, bi-lateral and multi-lateral agencies where it is being broadened to include both new approaches to the organization of public services (Managerial Public Administration) and the recognition of the importance of civil society. Thus, programs planned for the second half of the decade by the IDB already include reference to the strengthening of civil society (as well the executive, legislative and judiciary) and there are a number of significant World Bank publications discussing the role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Participatory Development².

Such news might lead to the assumption that having emerged from the economic crisis of the 1980's into the relative peace of widespread democracy and new regional economic initiatives, Latin America was back on the road to development with a clear and effective set of reform strategies, supported and approved by the current best thinking within the leading international agencies. The objective of this paper is to place this assumption in check and

¹ Fiftieth Session Agenda Item 12, Resolution 50/225 adopted by the General Assembly at its 112 th plenary meeting on the 19th April 1996.

² Bhatnagar, B. & Williams, A.C. Participatory Development and the World Bank. World Bank Discussion Papers, 183, Washington D.C., the World Bank, 1992. The World Bank's Partnership with Nongovernmental Organizations. Poverty and Social Policy Department. Washington D.C., The World Bank, 1996

show that, as a present day theory of action, it reflects a very shallow appreciation of the implications of continuous Latin American involvement with administrative reform over a period of seventy years.

What an alternative approach to reform might be is outside the specific focus of this paper and part of a wider set of questions about government action and development. The paper does however suggest that a more detailed examination of the history of attempts at public administration reform must at least raise serious doubts as to the optimism and direction of current activities. In noting the contrast between the conclusions derived from country specific histories, where administrative reform can be seen against the background of political events, and those provided by successive generations of regional general reform models, the paper will argue for a social-constructionist approach to reform in which theories of action are seen as narratives produced within an inter-organizational matrix of shifting institutional relations. The resulting "current view", it will be suggested, is far more a consequence of the space available to policy brokers than it is of a critical analysis of the conclusions of reform experiences.

Studying Administrative reform in Latin America

The basis for the paper is a seventeen country study of administrative reform activities in mainland Latin America (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Venezuela, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico).³ These form a group of countries with different geographical and economic insertions, different sizes and market structures, yet with many partial links and similarities that, whilst not turning them similar, do bound the dissimilarity within reasonable limits. For example, Graham (1990) has pointed to the centrality of the "state" both in role and concept. For North Americans, state is normally a word that refers to the middle tier of government action and the place where people live (as in the State of Vermont). For many northern north Europeans it hardly appears in conversation - it is governments not "states" that are responsible for actions. In Latin America, political regimes tend to almost without exception concentrate political and administrative power within an "executive" or presidential system with very little role for a legislative and which, despite analytical attempts to the contrary continues resiliently (Linz & Valenzuela 1994). It is this distant fused space where executive, legislative, politician and public administrator merge into authority figures with rights of office, discretionary powers and who have to be approached by round about ways for favors, that characterizes much of Latin America's collective representation and concern for "the State" and its role.

³ The study under the title of : Reforming the Reformers: the Saga of the State and Public Administration in Latin America is being supported by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, (Sida). The author would like to acknowledge the help given by library and archive staff at the Instituto Centroamericano de Administración Pública (ICAP), The Benson Collection at the University of Texas-Austin, Sida and the Fundação Getulio Vargas.

The study of the state and public administration in Latin America has several distinguishing characteristics when comparing it to other contexts of public sector reform. The first of these being that the process of political separation from Europe or, specifically, Spain and Portugal, took place before the developmental constructs of the late twentieth century were socially formed (Sachs 1992). Thus terms like "de-colonialization", "rich-poor", "emerging nations", whilst present today, were not to be found in the political debates and public discourse of many of those who were active in nearly 200 years of successive attempts to change Latin American societies. Indeed it was the Bourbon reforms in the 1760's and the presence of Charles III's Visitador Galvez with the role of reorganizing administrative structures in the colonies that can be seen as providing an early lesson on the unintended consequences of reform. Galvez's actions generated widespread resistance amongst the local born elites and were a substantial factor in stimulating the independence movements.

Whether Galvez can be held responsible or not, Latin America has certainly made administrative and state reform into a major agenda item of political and intellectual discussion, investing in studies, seminars and political promises to act in relation to the state and administration. The direct and indirect financial investment has been immense. Caiden (1991) commented:

"The most important fact about Latin America over the past four decades has been the stubbornness with which it has pursued administrative reform, despite so many failures and disappointments. Possibly nowhere else in the world have so many governments announced bold, imaginative reform plans to achieve so little in practice." (p. 262)

The third characteristic reflects the first two at the individual level. Latin America has had its own universities, schools and institutes for at least a century and in some cases much longer. The first universities, essentially theological faculties but nevertheless providing an important basis for local intellectual debate, opened in Lima and Mexico in 1551. By the middle of the next century, universities had been created in Bogotá (1580), Cordoba, Argentina (1613), Sucre, Bolivia (1621), Yucatan, Mexico (1624), Quito, Ecuador (1622), Ayacucho, Peru (1677) and Guatemala City (1676). By 1650, Bogotá had already four universities or institutes of higher education. Brazil would be the last country to develop its own seats of higher learning, given the important role of Coimbra, but even there schools, faculties and later universities are in place by the early part of the 20th century. Consequently, Latin American elites have had access to and have often participated in leading edge centers of technical and scientific research. With its own lawyers, economists, social scientists and administrators and referent organizations such as CEPAL and FLACSO, it could not be described as a passive receiver of "official public sector wisdom".

Any study of public administration is almost by definition comparative. In order to be able to think about how a specific phenomenon is structured - for example government and public administration in country A - it is necessary to develop some mechanism which differentiates it from other similar phenomena. Given that most countries tend to have only one public administration - at least in formal or institutional terms - its form and character only emerges when compared to that of another country. The difficulty is in how this

comparison is made. Is it to be based on the question "what is different between A and B", or is the question in fact "where is B different from A"? The difficulty with the second, apparently equally innocent form of questioning is that if by any chance A is construed as being "better" than B, the follow-up question becomes "and how can B resolve this problem?". The force of this supposition can be easily demonstrated by considering the general disbelief that would greet the statement that there was nothing intrinsically wrong or worse about public administration and the State in Latin America.

To describe the process of reform from the 1930's to the present day requires bringing together events which are built up along at least three dimensions. The first, more straight forward, is the public history of administrative reform in each country as reported in source documents and congress papers. This provides access to the way in which reform actors talk about what was done, where, for what reason and to what end. (There is however very little access to the private history of these events).

The second dimension brings in the political, social and economic contexts of the reforms which, depending on the period, can be national, regional or international. Thus, the political context of Paraguay after Stroessner is very much Paraguay whilst the various social emergency funds of the 1980's have as a background the general Latin American crisis of the same period.

The third dimension refers to the strategies of public administration reform that are made available at any one time and that circulate as current best practice or as a favored intervention technique amongst a number of agencies both inside and outside the region.

The fixing of these three dimensions does not imply that the first is a mere product of the other two, that is, that international fashion and socio-economical structural factors determine the nature of public administration reform. They do play a vital role, for reform is inevitably influenced by the one and takes place within the other. However there is still space to allow reform its own specific sphere of reflection and partial choice.

It is very easy to become over ambitious in gathering background material and examples of reform. Each step opens up more and more possibilities and once the move is made from general descriptions to specific public sector changes and laws there is a potentially never ending supply of case material. The approach adopted has been to concentrate on those events that institutional actors refer to when they talk to each other about administrative reform and provide self-reports of their own reform actions, histories and wishes. Especially useful were documents developed by Lamas for ICAP in 1969, various local conferences on administrative reform in the 60's and 70's and meetings held under the auspices of CLAD and the Spanish INAP during the 1980's (CLAD 1979, 1992, INAP 1985, 1987, 1988). Comparative studies are less frequent and do not cover many countries (for example Wahrlich 1974, Hammergren 1983, Salgado & Valdés, 1984, Kliksberg 1984, Chaudhry, Reid & Malik 1993, RAP 1994) but a number of specific country studies exist covering single periods. Curiously, administrative reform has not had much presence within the principle area studies journals (Hopkins 1974 being one of the few general attempts at reviewing research and theory that is well worth re-reading in 1997). Some two hundred

locally printed books, articles and mimeo reports were used which contained over 400 specific country references to public administration reform activities, histories and plans. Paraguay was the least present country (five sources) but most had between 10-15 and some, especially Brazil, Colombia, Mexico and Venezuela appearing over 25 times.

On the broad economic and political spectrum, the period in which the analysis begins (from the 1930's onwards) marks the time when in many of the Latin American countries the traditional oligarchies of raw material and agricultural producers and their exporting agents and suppliers came under pressure as the basis of the export-import model broke down. This happened firstly through world war one, when there was a high demand for raw materials but no reverse supply of finished goods , and later in the depression when there was no demand for the former. For many years, raw materials had flowed outward and finished goods had flowed in. Commerce, finance and the land held the power whilst a small urban professional class represented the voice of liberalism. The gradual move to import substitution meant industry and an urban work force. However this did not take place in any way analogous to the rise of the industrial entrepreneur in 19th century Europe, whose relation with the industrial working class was to play such a decisive part in the emergence of the modern north European state (see Polanyi 1944). In Latin America the reverse was the case:

"In reality, the business spirit of the industrial bourgeoisie in the capitalist countries was, in Latin America, a characteristic of the state, especially in the periods of specific impulse. The state occupied the place of a social class, whose appearance history needs but has had little success" Galleano 1980 p.228

Working class movements were present on the continent, largely brought by immigrant workers as part of their own traditions of labor organization. Between 1910 - 1925 there were a surge of anarcho-syndicalist movements , but the response by the traditional oligarchies and new military professionals was severe. At best governments in this period were to be "cooptative democracies" (Skidmore & Smith 1992) in which ruling elites were to involve the newer middle class politicians within various liberal regimes. Latin American liberalism, without a strong middle class ascension as an economic power and with the urban professionals dependence on rural elites, was to be more rhetoric than action and was certainly not strong enough to face the consequences of the great depression. As Calvert and Calvert (1993) comment, between 1930-1933 armed forces had overthrown the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and Peru and in various others, for example Uruguay, presidents assumed considerable powers.

By the end of the second world war import substitution industrialization was the dominant theme, especially for those countries whose size makes the raw material export model impossible to sustain. By the end of the 1950's in many places rapid urban development and industrialization is under way along with a growth in middle class incomes and an increase in the size of the urban proletariat. Conditions in rural areas in the 1950's however remain largely the same and slowly but surely problems of land reform will start to emerge in those countries with a large rural labor force. The state that will assume an active role in business initiatives through tariff barriers, import restrictions and investment in state and private

enterprises, will also stilt, with rare exceptions, the emergence of autochthonous urban trades unions, worker based political parties and rural reforms.

The breakdown of the populist model in the turn to the 1960's leads to a very active, if not chaotic, period of political organization in many countries fired by discussions on development and by different approaches to economic and social planning. However the newer import substituting industrialization model was exposing class conflicts and unresolved social questions around income distribution. In many places the result would be the politicized military, not within a party but almost as a party, with a theory of order and development, of planning and national sovereignty, anti-left and anti any group that would not accept the need for a managerialist approach to society. The pattern of development led by these various coalitions around the armed forces has been described by O'Donnell as bureaucratic authoritarianism (1973) and by others as military developmentalism (Calvert & Calvert 1992). It would be until well into the 1980's that Latin America could look at itself as a set of countries where governments were a result of relatively free elections which, significantly, a very large percent of their populations were to experience for the first time in their lives.

Defining Administrative Reform

For the purpose of the paper, no assumption will be made about the specific or correct term to be used in referring to the organizational consequences and actions that result from the development of the state and public administration. Indeed the paper will assume that the various definitions and re-definitions of the term used within the Latin America are themselves worthy of inspection. To place these within context it is helpful to identify some of the more general trends in definition that have been articulated internationally over the years.

During the period leading up to the early conferences under the aegis of the United Nations in the late 1960's and early 1970's, the term in use was "Administrative Reform". The UN report on its 1971 Brighton Conference resumed this well:

"Programs of major administrative reform are frequently essential to set up the necessary administrative capabilities for economic and social development and for carrying out government functions in general.....major administrative reforms are defined as specially designed efforts to induce fundamental changes in public administration systems through system-wide reforms or at least through measures for improvement of one or more of its key elements, such as administrative structures, personnel and processes."

Since then, the term has been sub-divided and stretched so that the resultant space includes specific administrative procedures, personnel systems and local change programs, structural

adjustment types of civil service review and reform, mixed capacity building and thematic change programs within the public sphere and major constitutional reforms of the state.

This change is already noted in the report of the 1981 Bangkok Conference on Enhancing Capabilities for Administrative Reform in Developing Countries:

"Perhaps as a result of the frequent use of the phrase in recent years, there is a tendency to assume a commonly shared view of administrative reform. However, a closer examination will show considerable variation in what is meant or referred to as administrative reform. There is also a marked absence of any clear-cut criteria to distinguish administrative reform from other activities such as administrative improvement, administrative change and administrative modernization."

page 4 (UN 1983)

Hammergren's (1983) summary of available definitions reflects well this period: "planned or at least premeditated systematic changes in administrative structures or processes aimed at effecting a general improvement in administrative output or related characteristics". By the 1990's the term had been stretched even further and can be frequently found absorbed within "State Reform" or "Public Sector Modernization". Caiden in his 1991 review noted some sixteen major areas included under the title of administrative reform:

- scope and activities of the administrative state
- national planning, agenda setting, performance indicators
- organization and structure of the machinery of government
- rule of law - constitutions, accountability, right to inform
- public policy making
- program execution - professional delivery
- public budgeting and financial administration
- public employment, practices and conditions
- public regulation, safeguards and practices
- preservation and maintenance of public capital
- general services - consistency, performance, standardization
- public enterprises - impact on economy and return on investment
- public management practices - O&M, des-bureaucratization, efficiency, quality
- public ethics - honesty, professionalism, anti-corruption
- public participation - voluntarism, complaint handling
- institutionalization of reform - R&D, training, agencies and schools

Early Reforms

The choice of "70 years" in the title of this paper is not fortuitous. The civil service personnel reforms in the United States of America had hardly begun and the concepts of rich/poor, developed/underdeveloped had still to be coined, when the United States of America's Kemmerer missions first appeared in Latin America (Drake 1989, Siedel 1994). These financial commissions, so called because of their head Dr. Edwin Walter Kemmerer,

visited Colombia (1923, 1930), Chile (1925), Ecuador (1926-1927), Bolivia (1927) and Peru (1931). Their aim was to advise host governments on various aspects of currency reform, banking, including central banks and financial management, making various recommendations on the organization of accounting controls. Using as a reference the U.S. General Accounting Office, the missions lead to the setting up of various offices of the "Controller General of the Republic". Budget management had specific consequences for administrative reform, as it was the emphasis on the importance of practical procedures for budget control that laid the basis for the professionalization of this area. Later, when Organization and Methods units begin to appear as an aid to efficiency they will be subordinated initially to the budget offices.

Attempts to introduce personnel practices and merit systems with tenure began to follow in the thirties for example in Brazil through constitutional reforms in 1934, in Argentina 1937, Columbia 1938, Paraguay 1944 and Panama 1946. These receive a big stimulus as a result of the United States public administration career reforms, but are also part of the early dissemination of personnel management practices. Many, if not all these experiences were to become negative, as clientelist practices return to find their way around merit systems. The degree to which this remains a question can be seen in the constant presence of basic personnel administration and career issues in reforms of the 1980's and in the conclusion of several recent World Bank studies (c.f. Chaudhry, Reid & Malik 1993, Numberg & Nellis 1990).

After the 1940's efficiency questions began to appear. Offices of Organization and Methods were set up in many countries reporting either within the judicial system (seen as subordinate to administrative law), budget and finance offices (with some success) or, later, to the general presidential office as this gathered shape and consistency. By the fifties, administrative training and institution building approaches would be appearing stimulated by the Marshall Plan 1948-1951. The Brazilian Public Administration School (EBAP) in 1952 and ESAPAC (ICAP) in Costa Rica in 1954 were followed by many administrative staff colleges and training centers that later would become INAP's and ENAP's.

Much of the administrative training and advisory work of the 1950's was influenced both by a rationalist model of efficiency and by the clear separation of politics from administration. Introduced by Woodrow Wilson in his 1887 essay on public administration, it was to be a concrete strategy of Willoughby in the US Department of General Administration. Wahrlich has commented (1974,1984) on the influence of Gullick's POSDCORB model as a creed for describing the administrative role (planning, organizing, staffing, directing, coordination, reporting and budget) and Salgado (1996) has drawn the parallel with Fayol's 1925 general treatise on administration. Many formal legal instruments, decrees and normative descriptions of public organizations within the region still carry a description of role holders duties and responsibilities couched in these terms.

Whilst the United States influence is evident, both for its geographical, political and technical presence, it is also important to recognize that the separation of government from administration, with the resulting ordered codes of administrative practice, fitted well within another and rarely commented feature of Latin American administrative life: its legal

structure. This owed much to Napoleon and the “Code Civil”. Independence movements do not necessarily need models in order to exist but are certainly influenced by these if they do exist. In the early 1800's there were two possible examples of sufficient stature to serve as potential foundations for debate: America and France. In Anglo-Saxon influenced north America, political development was very much at a local county and state level, concentrated on a small strip of the Atlantic coast with consciously very restricted federal functions. There never had been a strong colonial “center” and there was no need to provide one; ideologically the founding fathers were moving in a different direction. It was their constitution that was to be widely copied, but not their legal system.

The French had removed a center and created a new center, along with a model of state which concentrated and subordinated the powers of regional and local government. This was a model that could be understood within Latin American history. What is more, it was expressed within a language and legal framework that shared with Spain and Portugal the romanistic tradition. The colonial “audiencias” had assumed the responsibility also administrative surveillance; law and administration were linked.

For Napoleon, creating a system of administration and state required drafting the rules and procedures of that system. Part of it was derived from the earlier roman pattern with its clear lines of military command, but current French practice was no longer restricted to the basic “written” law, also of roman origin. The laws of “customs” were also strongly established, bringing different traditions and practices from one part of France to another. Napoleon moved not only to clarify part but the whole ordering of law, resolving the conflicts between the “written” and the “customs” across all aspects of French life. The Code Civil spread both forcefully - as Napoleon placed more and more of Europe under French hegemony - and through identification as it was taken up by the ex-colonies in Latin America whose roots were in the same romanistic tradition. The comparative law scholars, Zweigert and Kötz (1987) comment:

“ The newly founded states of Latin America needed national and unifying civil codes; the only available model was the French Code Civil. Spanish law was out of the question as being the law of the previous colonial power; in any case it was neither codified nor uniform even in Spain where local customary laws survived. In contrast the French Code Civil was the product of the Great Revolution, rooted in a world of ideas on which the Latin Americans had frequently drawn to justify their own struggles for independence. In its compactness and terseness of phrase the Code Civil was far ahead of any other model, and furthermore it was so full of traditional concepts and ideas, especially from Roman law, that its reception represented no breach with the legal institutions familiar to the Spanish and Portuguese settlers. The civil codes of the Latin American States are consequently heavily influenced by the Code Civil, though to different degrees.”(p 117)

The Latin American adaptations of the “Code Civil” produced a situation in which it is public law and administrative law that determine the orientation given to most administrative actions and which specify what can be done, whereas in countries influenced by the Anglo-

American model much of administrative and personnel action is considered covered by existing common law, and moves from case to case guided by the limits of what cannot be done. The recognition of such potential differences in posture towards order and the form in which it is specified and controlled is essential in understanding why, for example, so much of Latin American public administration reform is developed in the format of global or total administrative systems or functional codes that have to be enacted in legislation or enshrined in extensive constitutions. The “Code Civil” for the Latin American countries does not cause things by itself and of itself. A product of its circumstances, it forms part of the continuous adaptations of steering systems within the Habermas model (1984), offering the life world an instrumental rationality for the ordering of events. The adoption of the Civil code provided both a link with the past in the present and expressed a desire about a future; but in doing so it also turned explicit the way of thinking about that future and the way of bringing it about. Those commentators who would later criticize Latin American reform as “too legal” would forget that “legal” is a quality and not a quantity.

The major reform decades

Efficiency, effectiveness, good management and trained staff provided a general background to the emerging public administration schools and institutes and to the early seminars of the postwar period. This laid a basis for what would prove to be a major reform period and to the effective construction of the “administrative reform debate”. Several strands are present: the first appearance of UN advisors in public administration to carry out diagnoses and make recommendations; CEPAL's widespread influence and emphasis on planning for national development (Prebisch 1964, CEPAL 1965, Iglesias 1992) with the consequent necessity for a reorganized public service to implement plans; the widespread introduction of Program Budgeting in many cases through the USAID (Columbia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Bolivia, Venezuela, Chile, Uruguay, Peru, Brazil and Central America (Flores & Nef 1984). USAID is itself a symbol of this period, having been formed out of Eisenhower's International Cooperation Administration and Development Loan Fund by Kennedy in 1961, within the Alliance for Progress formalized in the Punta del Este Charter.(Lowenthal 1991, Robertson 1994).

Various factors will combine in the 1970's to fix a different concept of public administration reform, not all present in all countries nor is the presence of one necessarily a signal for the other. However the result will clearly mark the tone for the decade. Concern with planning as an approach to development was not only present within the intellectual and democratic left, but also on the technocratic right especially that part linked to or within the modernization movements of the armed forces.

Planning requires articulation and coordination, and soon the word "system" was introduced on a broad scale to refer to systems of planning, budgeting, finance, personnel and supply that must span across different agencies yet be linked to a central unit. Administrative Reform now becomes the reference word for global changes in structure and personnel designed to support National Development Plans , that seek to bring public administration

under control by providing structural coherence, functional specificity and adequate personnel practices with overall budgeting and planning requirements. In a number of cases, such as Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay this was directly linked to military regimes and their own peculiar brand of developmental theory. But it was also an approach stimulated by the language of "planned change" present both in development agencies and in business and public administration schools under the "organizational development" banner. Attempts at Reforms in Mexico and Venezuela are further examples from countries that were not following the military route.

The 1980's were characterized at the beginning by financial crisis (see CEPAL Review 1985, Rosenthal 1989) and by the middle by the specific new administrative reform model developed to deal with the crisis on an individual country scale : structural adjustment. Structural adjustment models - later to become the "governance" approach (Dia 1993) - had to do with adjusting public sector budgets to income and tax levels, removing state control from public sector enterprises, opening up the economies and reducing the role of the state (Felix 1992). They were frequently coupled with the semi-independent and somewhat contradictory social investment funds (Siri 1992, Glaessner, Lee, Sant'Ana & St. Antoine 1994). The result as the 80's became the 90's was often and especially in those countries undergoing structural adjustment, a very restricted view of public administration reform under the heading of Civil Service Reform with a concentration on reduced numbers, streamlined hierarchies and better managerial salaries. Venezuela continued to be an exception.

Terms such as "downsizing", "re-engineering" or "rolling back the State" were being introduced from the competitively hawkish and increasingly neo-liberal world of business administration. Whilst not specifically or uniquely a product of World Bank thinking they became largely associated with the Bank because of its strategy in financial investment for debt resolution (Eguren 1990). This more restrictive view of reform did remain to find its way within a newer approach that had been emerging gradually in seminars and working parties, without doubt stimulated by the Venezuelan experience with COPRE (the Presidential Commission for the Reform of the State), the UNDP supported CLAD technical office in Caracas, the general return to democracy within the region and the growth of new forms of economic cooperation.

This was to produce the shift away from the topic of "public administration" as such and towards the "state" (Faletto 1989, Klicksberg 1992, Oszlak 1992, CLAD 1992, RAP 1994). The result was "reform of the state" as a wide process of reflection on state and society that would include and expand on both global administrative reform and the more specific civil service personnel reforms. Including the widespread attempts at decentralization and the enactment of municipal legislation it has broadened to reflect over the institutions in society as a whole. Thus, in a significant move, the Inter-American Development Bank added to its more traditional lending role a major technical assistance program in the area of Modernization of the State and Strengthening of Civil Society. At the same time, the World Bank has developed specific strategies for improving dialogue with Non Governmental Organizations following recognition of the ineffectiveness of hard line policies in dealing

with sustainable development, hunger and poverty (cf. Serrageldin, Cohen & Leitmann 1994, Binswanger & Laandell-Mills 1995).

The “reform of the state” is currently taking many forms but its use is widespread. One of its more recent themes has been that of the importance of moving from a bureaucratic conception of public administration to what is being termed “managerial public administration” (Bresser Pereira, 1996). This is a process that the authors and practitioners involved see as having been gradually formed over a number of years. An earlier alert in this respect came, somewhat prophetically, in the opening address at the 1971 United Nations Brighton Seminar. Lord Fulton, head of the British reform commission, referred to the fact that increasingly public servants were being involved in "running things" (UN 1971). As a result, managerial qualities were being called for to "supplement - and sometimes to supersede - those associated with the older tasks and methods". Managerial public administration seeks to provide a different perspective for considering state reform and, in particular, is behind current reform efforts in Brazil.

Whilst reduction in public control of business, the widespread attempts at decentralization of central government and increased municipal responsibility for service provision have often been a practical consequence of a lack of funds rather than a conscious political desire, the gathering coherence around the “reform of the state” does suggest that at this broad level a new theory of action is being generated. However, how new is it and what is likely to be its fate?

Financial management, organization and methods, budgeting, personnel administration, management capacity, staff training, organizational design, the development of regulatory mechanisms and agencies are the practical building blocks around which reform has taken place. As each narrative replaces its predecessor, the overall framework has grown and expanded - from procedures, to departments, to organizations, to the state and most recently, through NGO's to civil society - but this has been largely an add-on process. Along the way small sections within Budget departments have become Work Study Offices; Training Schools have grown and become integrated with personnel administration into National Civil Service Departments; National Centers of Reform have been created along with their respective Commissions, and these various areas moved from Finance, through Planning and the Presidential Office to in many cases become Ministries on their own. From improvements in procedures the arena has grown to the reform of the state, from the practical and the concrete to the symbolic (Spink 1992).

At the same time there is no attempt in the more recent models to suggest that budgets should not be controlled, that efficiency and method studies are not vitally important in service provision, that personnel administration procedures are not required in order to recruit, select, promote and pay staff, that training is not relevant or that organizations should not be examined and redesigned and that mechanisms for coordinating and processing information are not necessary. On the contrary, all these elements and the many others that have been acquired along the way can be found in the actions plans of the most recent approaches. It is as if the lack of success has led not to a reflection of why change did

not prove effective but, on the contrary, to the argument that something else needed to be included, that a wider canvas was required with greater powers and scope.

It is this that leads to what can be called the technical or voluntarist view of reform in which there is an assumption of a clear, correct technical approach to administration (which is separate from government and politics), which will be effective if leaders have the will and public servants the willingness to acquire and put the prescribed approach into practice. Adjustments to the technical approach are made so as to increase its capacity and range and newer and more centrally placed agencies are recommended as a way of guaranteeing the importance of reform and encouraging willingness.

An Alternative View of Administrative Reform

If attention is directed to the individual countries, placed not horizontally in relation to each other in time but vertically, within their own history, a different image of reform appears. Whilst the general trend may be the version that circulates within the reform community, it is in practice only one amongst various possible narratives that might compete for space and resources.

To begin with, the various descriptions of trends mentioned so far have considered Reform as visible, coordinated and planned actions that can be described as having an overall purpose. As a result they normally downplay, if not ignore the everyday processes of administrative actions and improvements; the world of doing things a little better, of trying a different approach. Thus, for example, the representatives from the Central American Countries who gathered in Costa Rica in 1970 (ICAP 1971) to discuss reform and hear reports from Brazil, Peru and Venezuela were all in agreement about how little Central America had done in the way of reform. Yet several of those present were from countries which had already experimented with a number of smaller and more local actions.

One of those present, Costa Rica, was in fact never to introduce a specific administrative reform until the late 1980's when it joined in the "Reform of the State" movement. However in the 40 or so intervening years from the Constitution of 1949, it developed its public sector, created new areas of service and conducted a myriad of small and local improvements in the area of administrative efficiency, organization and training. This would never receive an explicit form, rather it was part of an ongoing emphasis by practitioners and ministers from different and competing parties in a non-coordinated and frequently contradictory way.

The same description can be applied to Chile who also until 1973 had never carried out an administrative reform. On the contrary, many local actions took place, in one ministry after the other, in a relatively autonomous manner with very idiosyncratic personnel rules and methods for dividing ministries and posts between parties. The process was one of gradual improvement, with attendant conflicts and set-backs over many years. Argentina also

presents a similar story of local incremental actions following the original National Council for rationalization in 1933. In all cases, this adaptive process generated results. In other countries where there have been major attempts at generating major global and planned reforms the reverse is the case, at least during normal political life.

Examining the reform history of each country alongside its major political developments it is possible to affirm with some confidence, that major reforms as systematic and coordinated attempts to change public administration in a major way have never been successfully implanted during pluralistic and democratic periods. They may be and have been attempted, but their results have not been even a fraction of the expected. On the contrary they have occurred relatively successfully in periods of exception, of military rule, of the suspension of civil guarantees and extreme presidentialism (as in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay during the late 1960's, 1970's and in some cases running into the 1980's).

Thus Brazil's reform commissions began life in the early Vargas period of exception to make some progress but ran into stalemate during the constitutional period even though the entire reform group was able to maintain itself active with institutional and international support. In 1967, three years after the military coup the reform would finally emerge as Decree Law 200. In Argentina it would be the COPRA that would generate national systems for administration in the mid 1970's and Chile's CONARA would announce itself after beginning the reform a few months after the coup, with a massive tome published in 1976, some 22 cm x 35 cm x 4 cm, complete with pictures of the National Flag, the statue of Bernard O'Higgins and the Chilean High Command.

Uruguay and Bolivia had made unsuccessful attempts at linking administrative reform with national planning in the turbulent 1960's before major reforms were announced in the 1970's. Peru's military claimed a direct developmental link with CEPAL and attempted to distance themselves from other regimes, but here again the circumstances were of exception.

Venezuela, on the other hand has been a major center for discussion on administrative reform since the events of 1958, yet despite a vast array of commissions and agencies (CAP, CORDIPLAN, COPRE, PRIE) and some of the more important theoretical work on the nature of reform, its global attempts have been far less than successful. What action that has taken place has been, once again, incremental. Colombia never developed a "reform school", maintained contact with a variety of different agencies and missions, created a number of commissions and agencies but again what results that did emerge from 1950-1980 were much more sporadic actions resulting from the muddling through of the different interests of alternating governments and micro-level attention to specific ministries.

The presence of the military or of dictatorships in themselves is no guarantee of reform. If there is a coming together of a "reform school" and a developmental militarist posture then global reform can take place; without this the topic of public administration reform would appear to disappear, even from the incremental agenda. Thus circumstances make reform quite irrelevant in Paraguay under Stroessner and Nicaragua under Somoza. Indeed any

attempts that were made to accept foreign advisors and pay lip service to reform, probably more to do with the preconditions of financial aid. In El Salvador, Panama, Honduras and Guatemala, the pattern is more varied but turbulence again affects possibilities of change. There are isolated actions in the 1960's and early 1970's but little will happen as wars and the growth of strong internal regimes linked to elitist groups, will create extreme conditions within which any planned action would be difficult.

Placing activities aimed at the middle and micro-level of change and improvement of public administration as the framework for study - and not "reform" and "modernization" as such - brings forward a very different set of examples for discussion.

In this respect Costa Rica and Chile (before 1973) have already been mentioned as has Colombia. In Mexico, despite various commissions and agencies, most results would also be partial and incremental. Mexico would even have the advantage in the late 1970's of its then President López Portillo having previously presided the administrative reform commission. Even though it was to take place in the twilight of Brazil's military period, the 1979 des-bureaucratization program managed to produce some major effects through its multiple incremental changes in administrative procedures, some of which were to survive for a considerable period. Despite its difficulties, the Venezuelan COPRE did serve as a model for an approach to stimulating broad discussion about the role and nature of state and government in a way that could interest presidents and ministers. There are experiences in Guatemala, with the return to civilian governments in the 1980's, when an approach was made at integration of different sectors and groups through a series of overlapping Development Councils. Hardly any attention has been paid to the 1980's Nicaraguan experience under the Sandinista Government (for a very useful view see Graham, in Conroy 1987). More recently, local government legislation, for example with the 1994 decentralization and popular participation laws of Bolivia, is providing a wide variety of potential paths for exploring practical relationships between government, local authorities, civil society, the state and the citizen.

This variety of experiences and potential conclusions stand in marked contrast to the emerging and apparently hegemonic narrative of the "Reform of the State".

In examining the vertical and horizontal histories, those that come from the countries themselves and those that are articulated in the multiple forums on reform that have taken place over the least forty years, there is evidence to suggest that year by year, period by period there has been a gradual narrowing of the reform theme and of narratives that surround public administration actions from a very heterogeneous 1930's and 1940's to a remarkable homogeneous 1990's. Even in the early 1960's countries still varied considerably in relation to strategies for developing public administration, without appearing, through their institutional actors to be particularly concerned about the differences between what they and others are doing. Indeed at times this was seen as a major merit (for example in Ecuador in the 1970's). In the 1990's there is much more agreement and institutional representatives seem keen to report their adherence to the "reform of the state". In the same way, over the years the wide variety of terms used to

describe both actions and agencies has gradually been reduced; more and more frequently spokespeople place their reports within a common frame of concepts.

Without doubt the Punta del Este Charter in 1961, with its major support for development administration, and the CEPAL emphasis on National Development Plans, which always included a topic on administration, played an important part in the process, as did the availability of funds. But the process was already taking place before these events and would continue into the 1990's as the WB and the BID would unwittingly assume the role of providing the official language for reform.

The construction of narratives: history as past and the future as new

The “order and progress” theme, much discussed in relation to Latin American countries, has a marked implication for the way in which modernity is faced (Faoro 1994). Modernization as the great “leap forward” into a precisely defined future through the use of correct techniques is very different from the conflictive and contradictory historically rooted process of social groups, communities and societies operationalising their moral orders. The former has clearly been present in the way that the official reform narratives have emerged, strengthening a increasingly broad, turn-the-page-of-history view of Administrative Reform, whilst ignoring the potential conclusions that incremental experiences might bring.

This process manifests itself in many ways, of which the selective mentioning of what is taking place and in what circumstances is merely one of them. Another example comes from the names given to major conferences and seminars.

As has been mentioned, the United Nations organizations held major Inter-regional seminars on Administrative reform in 1971 (Brighton, England), in 1981 (Bangkok, Thailand) and in 1985 (Beijing, People's Republic of China), in addition to specific workshops at an area level. More recently the theme of decentralization has appeared, for example in a seminar held at Santa Cruz de la Sierra Bolivia in 1993 and in relation to metropolitan governance (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 1991 and Tokyo, Japan, 1993). The World Bank, BID and CEPAL have also been active with specific seminars and expert meetings on aspects of public administration reform. However, these various events have rarely if ever been given an order of sequence, being reported simply as meetings, seminars and workshops at certain times and places.

This is in marked contrast to another sequence of congresses, seminars and meetings set up by representative agencies the institutional actors of the Latin American countries themselves, frequently with external support. Thus the : I Encontro Interamericano de Administração para o Desenvolvimento took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brasil in November 1964, hosted by the Interamerican School of Public Administration at the Getulio Vargas Foundation (FGV). The event was held within the spirit of the Punta del Este Agreement, to study the problems that affect public administration in the countries of the American continent. Amongst the reasons given for the event were: “the need to adapt the techniques

and processes of public administration to the peculiarities of the Latin American problematic”. (Participants included Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, USA, England, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, Venezuela, BID, OEA, UNESCO,) . In July 1970, the Primero Seminario Regional de Reforma Administrativa took place at ICAP Costa Rica, with the presence of representatives from Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and invited speakers from Brazil, Peru and Venezuela. In December, 1973, the Primeiro Seminario Interamericano de Reforma Administrativa was held in Rio de Janeiro at the FGV, with a follow up, still as the 1st seminar, in Oaxtepec, Mexico the following year. Many countries were in attendance and various cases presented.

In 1974, Bogotá, Columbia and ESAP were to host the Primero Seminario Latino American de Administración Pública. Present were over 80 representatives from Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay, Mexico, Bolivia, Puerto Rico, Peru, Brasil, Chile, Argentina, Costa Rica and Venezuela. Amongst the results was the so called “compromiso de Bogotá”, which contained, amongst its 16 considerations and 13 recommendations the need to : “Fight against ideological and technological dependence produced by the adoption of models that don’t respond to the situation and interests of Latin America, for which it is necessary to define a separate doctrine and specific norms that can be applied to our countries”. In addition, further support was to be given by ALAP (Asociación Latino Americano de Administración Publica) for the practical creation of CLAD.”

CLAD had been formally created in 1972, as a result of the initiative of Mexico, Venezuela and Peru and its Board was formed by representatives of the Governments of member countries. The only CLAD members not included in this study are Barbados, Cuba, Spain, Granada, Guyana, Jamaica and the Dominican Republic. Chile, Bolivia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Jamaica joined shortly afterwards, followed by Argentina, Barbados and Guyana with Brasil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Paraguay, Trinidad-Tobago and Uruguay observers by 1976 when the Board met for its fourth meeting under the Presidency of Chile (1975-6) in Santiago. Even though the board met regularly, it was to be only in Mexico in 1979, that the first more open event took place: the Primero Coloquio del CLAD sobre experiencias nacionales en Reforma Administrativa .

Thus between 1964 and 1979, at the height of the wave of public administration reform throughout Latin America, there are no less than five extremely important yet “first” events in the area. Five times in which, for symbolic if not for political reasons everybody started all over again. Finally in 1996, CLAD created an open category of individual membership and held its 1st Congreso Interamericano del CLAD sobre Reforma del Estado y de la Administración Publica in Rio de Janeiro. However this time the spell has been finally broken and the second meeting has already been announced for Venezuela in 1997.

If congresses and seminars play an important role in confirming emerging narratives, their elements are constructed from the theories that are espoused about reform and from the analyses that are made of failures and successes. Virtually all the documents consulted in this study contain some form of diagnosis or description of the problems that public administration was facing in their respective countries or within the various regions or sub-

regions. However again, virtually all these descriptions are used as a way of saying : “look how much is wrong”. The answer is nearly always provided in terms of “what is good or right”. Thus, why it went wrong and what this might mean in terms of the relation between public administration, the executive, legislative, government, society and the citizen is rarely examined by the social and institutional actors, academics and practitioners who populate the reform arena.

It is extremely rare to find comments such as that by Reid (Chaudhry, Reid & Malik 1993) referring to the “byzantine” nature of the personnel pay structures in Uruguay in which multiple salary supplements combine to generate at least some level of pay rewards:

“...it does not necessarily follow that public employees hired in this context perform their tasks less efficiently than would those hired under a simpler and less readily circumvented civil service pay structure....”(p.62)

Similarly, in relation to the theories and explanations of reform that have emerged within and taken an active part in the evolving reform debate, it is the technical dimension of “how to get it right” that has dominated over the discussion of political appropriateness. In the line of technical arguments some four different groupings can be identified. These can be broadly described as “quantity theories”, “competence theories”, “strategy theories” and “power theories”.

Quantity theories can be summed up by the word “too”: too much, too little, or too late. Here the emphasis is on noting errors of scale, of timing and of support that effect the dimensions of reform. Reform itself is not questioned and is therefore assumed to be valid. A similar understanding is present in the second set of views. Competence theories tend to be of two kinds, benevolent or extremely prejudiced. In the former, present in development administration, it is the skill and knowledge that needs to be increased for reform to be more effective. Still today, nearly all the countries in the region have their national schools of public administration influenced by either English, French or United States of America models of staff training. The negative or prejudiced version of competence covers those arguments and authors for whom cultural determinism, or a generic Latin American lack of will makes administrative efficiency and change impossible.

Strategy theories are at the heart of reform narratives and form the frameworks for reform programs. Technical in approach, they draw in at various moments, elements from organizational development, organizational design, personnel administration, organization and methods, system theory, planning and financial management. The history of reform has been to a large extent an ever increasing spiral in which more and more items are added in to the technical tool box; rarely are items rejected and rarely does a previous item return to priority status once new items are added. The discussion of technical theories is rarely comparative and generally additive. Thus, personnel legislation and the creation of career and merit systems are still part of the wider Reform of the State strategy even though there is no evidence of any major successful implantation of such systems in a modernized form. They have had their moments, the most recent being alongside the structural adjustment

strategies under the World Bank title of Civil Service Reform, but will never disappear from the scene.

Power theories are derived in part from elements of the previous two and have been present both directly or between the lines of many an advisor's report, especially when discussing the importance of government support. Their almost exclusive concern is the importance of providing positive sanction and priority for a technical area that is essential yet not seen as politically attractive. Generally democratic, they can at times, such as during military developmentalism, provide support for authoritarianism in relation to reform. Even Kemmerer and his staff would admit that a strong government and a bit of exception did not hurt the cause of reform. Siedel (1994) cites a mission memo in Ecuador arguing in 1927 that: "it would not be wise to reestablish constitutionality until such a time as would enable the provisional government to fully reorganize its various departments". Other more milder versions of power theories abound, but certainly have in common the idea that strong government is a necessary requirement for "driving" reform. These are included as a grouping within the set of technical theories because their prime argument is that the technical theory is correct and that the "politics" can get in the way. They are political, therefore, only inasmuch as they recognize the presence of political factors; at heart they are technical because they require these factors to be held at bay.

With such a variety of theories available it is not surprising that the reform arena gives the appearance of debate and discussion. Yet all the groupings mentioned have in common the direct or indirect support for reform as a technical narrative. Political theories form a fifth group that is very much a minority within the reform arena. Based on a processual view of social and economic action, they emphasize the nature of the contradictions present and argue, in a variety of ways, that it is only through these and because of these that any significant reform will take place and that this, more likely than not will take its own route and time. One such group emerged in Brasil in the early 1960's within the same institution and as a counterpart to the dominant technicians of the Getulio Vargas Foundation (Guerreiro Ramos 1970, Mello e Souza 1994) and others include O'Donnell (1978) and Orlak (1981). Graham (in press) has been one of the few outside observers who have maintained a constant contact with the theme of public administration and others have picked up specific dimensions (for example Geddes, 1991, Przeworski 1989, Schneider, 1993 , Spink 1987).

The recent discussion of "Managerial Public Administration" has clearly two tendencies within it of which the more political (developed, for example, by Brazil's Minister for State Reform, Bresser Perreira 1996) is largely a minority in relation to the vast majority who see, in recent reforms in Britain and New Zealand, the clear benefit of transferring good business practices to the public sector, transforming the latter into a set of market relations largely to be left alone by a "rolled back"⁴ state.

⁴ This unfortunate term was in much use in World Bank circles and documents until quite recently

Truncated Advocacy Coalitions

A tendency to build dominant reform models based on the technical appreciation of reform requirements in an ever increasing spiral of complexity, without providing space for the critical assessment of previous approaches to reform - or of "reform" itself - must throw doubt on the current crop of reform ideas, independently of their individual and autonomous merit. To what extent has the reform debate and the circumstances through which narratives are created in an evolving matrix of actions and arenas, generated a self censoring process that has unwittingly limited the range of discussion.

Thus, the implicit rules of diplomacy that bind bi-lateral and multi-lateral agencies, plus general courtesy and a lack of knowledge, may make it difficult or unlikely for technical and advisory staff to make specific comments about internal political affairs and their relationship to social and economic contradictions. It is rare, for example to see evaluation or project documents consider explicitly the implications of policy change through the electoral process and the way in which one or the other party might be more or less favorable to reform. Frequently reform histories are provided in a totally a-historical form as dates and occurrences totally disconnected to the social and political events of the time. Equally, seminars and meetings with official status have to reach conclusions that are acceptable to all, couched in terms that are technically acceptable.

In the same way and certainly since the Kemmerer missions, governments and their agencies have been attentive to the areas in which programmatic aid has been made available and their technical staff have been constantly productive in generating policy documents on good developmental practices. The various administrative reform events and techniques brought into the region through the Alliance for Progress serves as sufficient example.

Reform, like many other developmental topics, implies projects, requires staff and offers opportunities for careers, both within and across agencies and national boundaries. It is a theme that interests people and generates debate and discussion. Governments and Presidents create and offer ministerial posts to their colleagues to act in this area and there are various referent organizations at regional, sub-regional and international levels in which it is possible to take part and through which contact can be made with colleagues in other countries. As the spiral has increased, so the number of actors and institutions involved has increased and their involvement in the maintenance of "reform" as a socially constructed narrative has deepened.

Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier (1993) have described an advocacy coalition approach to the formation of public policy within a specific arena. Although working primarily within the framework and focus of domestic policy, they have shown how such coalitions tend to occur over longer periods of time than that of specific governments and involve a large and diverse set of actors who come to share value priorities and causal assumptions about how to realize them; what might be called the "construction of conventional wisdom". Advocacy coalitions show, they suggest, a non-trivial degree of coordinated activity over time and seek

to translate their beliefs into public policies or programs (in goals, directives and the empowerment of administrative agencies). To the extent that different advocacy coalitions are able to compete for space and attention; brokerage will provide the minimum of reflexivity within which the contradictions between narratives can be made partially accessible.

What happens when there are subtle yet self-imposed restrictions of the range of questions permitted, when the availability of resources is seen as related to a particular viewpoint or when potential brokers are themselves drawn into the coalition? This is not the focus of Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier's work, but it seems possible to argue that the result is likely to be a restrictive process generating a truncated advocacy coalition lacking in reflexivity. In the case under study it has been seen how increasingly the heterogeneous nature of different reform approaches has been gradually brokered into a relatively homogeneous framework to reform. As a result, what appears to have been an increasingly restrictive process has led to the future replacing the past as the object of analysis, to amnesia about the conditions in which major reforms were effectively implanted and to a setting in which resource opportunities and technical neutrality can pre-empt certain areas of debate. Any advocacy coalition is by nature both a product and producer of its circumstances and will exist within the *epistème* of its time; however concern here is not with this general nature of any collective narrative but with specific circumstances that generate specific versions.

Organizational and inter-organizational processes, especially of an institutional kind, contain within them references to wider patterns of social action. Thus if narratives as symbol systems contain structures of signification that can be mobilized to legitimize the sectional interests of hegemonic groups (Giddens 1979), then perhaps there is a different set of explanations that can be made available once the truncated nature of the current advocacy coalition framework of reform is recognized.

Thus, taking as an example the much debated importance of merit systems, what would be an alternative approach within an incremental and historically specific framework? If it can be assumed that positions of influence, command and sanction with public services are of interest to elite groups, it follows that, amongst other factors present, the mechanisms by which such posts are filled will reflect the socially legitimated options open to elite groups to gain access to posts at any particular point in time. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have shown how patterns of acquisition and reproduction of social and economic capital create mechanisms of access and control. Meritocracy, far from being considered as a technical definition of equality of opportunity, which civil service procedures either have or aspire to create might, within an alternative perspective, require analysis of the social meaning attached to merit itself, including the mechanisms by which such "merit" is guaranteed.

Understanding public administration within the lived-in-world of everyday practices, part of and not independent from the contradictions of development may provide an alternative starting point to the question of reform and to the issue of "reform" itself. Certainly the past still has much to teach the future in this respect.

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