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Political Theory Rediscovers Public Administration

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Keywords

public administration, bureaucracy, legitimacy, good government, moral agency, democratic theory

Abstract

Political theory is rediscovering the colossus of public administration—the vast public service and regulatory bureaucracies and their countless employees and extensions that conduct the daily business of government. This review explains how something so visible could ever have fallen from view, and surveys four burgeoning areas of research. These pertain to the legitimacy of public administration, to the articulation of standards of good government distinct from good public policy, to the analysis of how the moral agency of bureaucrats is implicated and undermined by the everyday operation of bureaucratic agencies, and to how we should conceptualize the state when we apprehend it through the seemingly banal routines of administration. What emerges from this body of work is a picture of the executive bureaucracy as an object of normative, critical, and conceptual inquiry on a par with the other two branches of government, the legislature and the judiciary.

POLITICAL THEORY REDISCOVERS PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

For something to be rediscovered it must first have been forgotten. In the slow, winding paths that academic disciplines take around their objects of study, the initial oblivion is sometimes more intriguing than the subsequent rediscovery. In the 1970s, for instance, political science, a discipline committed to studying the institutions that structure life in common, found itself stumbling across an old acquaintance, the state (Evans et al. 1985). Half a century later, it is the turn of political theory, a field committed to scrutinizing the justification and exercise of power, to reacquaint itself with the colossus of public administration—the vast regulatory and public service bureaucracies and their countless employees and extensions that conduct the daily business of government. These bureaucracies form the stable core of the executive branch. They comprise primarily unelected officials who stay in place as elected politicians and their appointees come and go. Some of these officials are government employees, who form the permanent civil service; others are contractors, who belong to private organizations. My aim in this review is to explain how something so visible could ever have fallen from view, and to survey a burgeoning body of work in political theory that aspires to take the executive bureaucracy out of the shadow of the two branches of government that have largely monopolized the attention of political theorists: the legislature and the judiciary.

If a reminder was needed of the extent to which we depend on the administrative state, the past two years have provided ample evidence. When the COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019) pandemic fell upon us, it is to regulatory and public service agencies that most people turned for information, advice, and reassurance. It is to their expertise, know-how, and implementation capabilities that many of us entrusted the health of our bodies, the preservation of our economy, and the difficult mission of accelerating the work of vaccine developers while changing deeply rooted social behaviors in record time. The sight of people lined up on streets and balconies the world over clapping in appreciation for the work performed by frontline public service workers, many of them government employees or contractors, was a rare show of recognition for the efforts that such workers and the organizations they belong to expend every day away from the spotlight. This is a labor so vast and reliable that we typically take it for granted and notice it only when it fails, like infrastructure.

Before public administration became a separate academic field, housed in its own schools and programs, it occupied a central place in the discipline of political science. At the institution where I completed my PhD, Harvard University, "public administration" is engraved above the entrance of Littauer, the building that once housed the political science department. Canonical figures such as Bentham and Hegel, and the American progressives whom Hegel inspired, devoted considerable attention to the administrative apparatus of the state. Given this legacy, it is surprising how little contemporary political theorists have written about the topic, and to what extent they have remained fixated on the dangers of administrative power.[1] Red tape, the specter of technocracy, the rule of nobody, the iron cage of rationality, the iron law of oligarchy, and the capacity to scale up social control to scales previously unimaginable: All of these have been recurring fears since

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[1]The forgetting did not work both ways. Scholars in public administration concerned with the legitimacy and ethics of bureaucracy, or with issues like the democratic deficit of administration and technocracy, often found themselves drawn toward political theory to interpret and critically appraise developments in public administration. For an example, see the Blacksburg Manifesto and *Refounding Public Administration* (Wamsley et al. 1990) or, more recently, the work of scholars such as Bertelli (2021) and Wagenaar (e.g., Griggs et al. 2014). Scholars of the European Union, who have long grappled with questions of legitimacy, have also frequently straddled the boundaries among public administration, public policy, and political theory. See, for example, Schmidt (2013) and Scharpf (1998), discussed below.

Weber (1979) gave us the analytic tools to understand the distinctive logic of bureaucracy. So have the threats of arbitrariness, bias, nepotism, corruption, and capture, which rear their heads when administrative agencies depart from the Weberian ideal type. Modern states may not be able to govern without large bureaucracies, but the general sentiment toward the latter, among contemporary political theorists at least, has been resolutely circumspect (e.g., Goodin 1988, pp. 184–223). Pettit (1997, p. 5) captures the zeitgeist well when he makes the petty counter clerk, on whose caprice welfare recipients and their children depend for meal vouchers, a figurehead for everything that a republican government should aim to avoid (see also Engster 2020, p. 625).

If public administration fell from view in political theory, therefore, it is not because it was deemed benign or insignificant but rather, I want to suggest, because the dominant way of thinking about it made the problems it raised—however doggedly difficult to address in practice—seem theoretically straightforward. Consider the doctrine of separation of powers. The legislature is in principle responsible for making policy; the judiciary for interpreting it and setting constraints on it; and the executive for implementing it. But what exactly does implementation entail? On one persistent and influential view, which Brodkin (2000) has dubbed the "compliance model" of bureaucratic responsibility, implementation consists in mobilizing technical expertise to find the most efficient way to attain the objectives spelled out in legislative statutes, subject to clarification and constraints set by the judiciary. The tasks performed by bureaucrats may be devilishly complex, but the major moral and political decisions—the decisions about which ends to pursue, which values to prioritize, which side constraints to respect—will have been settled for them by the other two branches of government.

As a descriptive account of how public administration operates, the compliance model of bureaucratic responsibility is deeply misleading, and has become ever more so with changes in governance spurred by reform programs inspired by the private sector, such as the New Public Management or Reinventing Government (e.g., Considine & Lewis 2003, Bevir 2010, Hood & Dixon 2015). Yet, the compliance model has proven more resilient as a normative ideal for how public administration ought to operate. This is in part because it offers simple, attractive answers to a host of concerns we may have about administrative power. According to the compliance model, the legitimacy of administration derives from the legislature, for it is a mere extension of it. If one has problems with what bureaucracy does, one should take them up at the source. Good government consists in faithfully, diligently, and economically pursuing the mandates delegated by the legislature. The administrative state, finally, is little more than an instrument for the other two branches of government to express themselves—a transmission belt. It is what Latour (2005, p. 39) would call an "intermediary," a conduit that transports directives without transformation—"defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs." In one sweep, the compliance model provides a theory of political legitimacy, an account of good government, an ethics for bureaucrats, and a conceptual account of the kind of rationality embodied in public administration.

The compliance model's persistence as a normative ideal has meant, however, that "an enormous gap has opened up between the way democratic states are supposed to function—or at least the way their operations are represented in normative political theory—and the way they actually do operate" (Heath 2020, pp. 17–18). A gap between reality and ideal is not, by itself, sufficient to impugn an ideal. But when the gap is large enough, it may cast doubt on the usefulness of the ideal as a guide for criticism and action in present circumstances (Thompson 2005, p. 54). And when the gap is stubborn enough, it may be wise to periodically reconsider whether we do indeed have the ideal right. Could it be that our ideal of public administration should evolve to better track aspects of administrative practice, rather than the other way around?

Public administration, after all, is not all dangers. As we are periodically reminded, it is also the bearer of promises, both as a vehicle for collective projects and as a counterforce that, in

principle at least, can stand up to special interests and political adventurism (e.g., Rahman 2016, Bagg 2021). Recall how, in the space of a few days following the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States, public administration went from being decried as a thorn in the side of democracy to being lauded by many political commentators from both parties as its saving grace, with bureaucrats encouraged to stand up to elected officials and serve as a bulwark against populism and electoral democracy more generally. What should we make of this reversal of fortune? Could it be that the existence of a semiautonomous administrative apparatus is not an embarrassment to liberal democracy but a crucial ingredient to its success (Heath 2020, p. 18)?

To entertain such a thought is to reopen a range of questions to which the compliance model of bureaucratic responsibility could provide straightforward answers. It is around these questions that the nascent literature on public administration has crystallized, and that future research can make important advances. It is around them too that this review is structured. First is the question of the legitimacy of administrative power. If public administration is not merely an extension of the legislature but a semiautonomous body, on what does its authority rest? Second is the question of good government. How should administrative agencies exert their legitimate authority, and what avenues of moral concern can we uncover by paying attention to how they do in fact exert it? Third is the question of moral agency. What kind of moral agents do bureaucrats need to be to exert such authority responsibly, and how can we support them in doing so? Finally, there is the question of how our understanding of that fundamental category of political thought, the state, is transformed when we apprehend it through the seemingly banal, yet semiautonomous routines of bureaucratic agencies and the artifacts around which these routines take shape. As a prelude to these questions, I begin by reflecting on why public administration may have fallen from view in the first place.

THE COMPLIANCE MODEL OF BUREAUCRATIC RESPONSIBILITY

There was a time, according to Thompson (2005, p. 52), when political theorists "understood the role of bureaucrats much as Hobbes had explained the role of public ministers: they resemble 'the nerves and tendons that move the several limbs of a body natural.' Because nerves and tendons. . . do not initiate anything on their own, political theory could safely ignore them." According to this view, which underpins the compliance model of bureaucratic responsibility, bureaucracies are essentially instruments for the enactment of legislative mandates. Elected politicians engage in normative deliberation to decide which ends are to be pursued; administrators exert technical discretion to find the best means to attain them. This effectively puts citizens, via the intermediary of the legislature, in the driver's seat (Christiano 2005).

This picture of public administration is inadequate on three counts. For a start, it understates the extent to which administrative agencies participate in making policy (e.g., Wilson 1989, Carpenter 2001, Bertelli 2021, Cohen 2021). They do so both directly, by setting the agenda for the legislature and lobbying for particular outcomes or broad statutory directives, and indirectly, by effecting changes in administrative practices that are subsequently officialized in law (Carpenter 2001, 2010). It may be tempting to describe this participation in policy making as a usurpation of the will of the people by unelected officials. But is it so? One may counter that administrative agencies, equipped with topical expertise and partially shielded from the ebbs and flows of partisan politics, are better positioned to understand and act in the public interest. Carpenter (2001, p. 4) has compellingly argued, moreover, that the autonomy of administrative agencies lies "less in fiat than in leverage." When administrative agencies act independently, it is because they have already built their own capital of political legitimacy—in the form of a

reputation—that they can leverage to get deference from politicians (Carpenter 2001, 2010). When polled, the public appears to recognize this. Fukuyama (2014, p. 498) observes that

> Americans. . . show the highest degree of approval precisely for those institutions—the military, NASA, the CDC—that are the least subject to immediate democratic oversight. . . . By contrast, the institution most directly accountable to the people, the U.S. Congress, receives disastrously low levels of approval.

Even if we set aside the participation of administrative agencies in policy making, a topic on which opinions may diverge (e.g., Cohen 2021), the compliance model of bureaucratic responsibility also vastly understates the extent to which bureaucrats have to make value judgments when implementing policy statutes (Zacka 2017a, pp. 18–20). This is a more fundamental criticism. As Richardson (2002, p. 116) observes in *Democratic Autonomy*, this is because policy "ends are frequently, and unavoidably, left vague by the legislatures, and we disagree quite pervasively about factors pertaining to selecting means as the best ones." Legislatures cannot avoid a certain degree of vagueness because they are meant to promulgate laws that are both stable and general, two characteristics that would be lost if they were to consider the details of the law's application to specific circumstances and contexts, a point already made by Hegel (Emerson 2015, p. 555). Even if they wanted to reduce vagueness, however, legislatures would struggle to do so. Considering the full ramifications of every piece of legislation would overwhelm their capacities, a bottleneck that could only be remedied by recreating an internal bureaucracy within the legislature (Richardson 2005, p. 227). At times, legislatures may also prefer vagueness because clarifying goals can lead to an impoverishment of the mandate (think, for instance, of the police's mandate to maintain order, and how much might fall through the cracks if one attempted to clarify it) [Wilson 1968, Lipsky 2010 (1980), p. 165; see also Zacka 2017a, pp. 48–65].

To capture this state of affairs, Richardson (2005, p. 227) proposes a new metaphor. Rather than thinking of the legislature as being in the "driver seat," we should think of it as a "taxicab passenger who sets the destination: '620 Main St., please,'" leaving the driver in charge of finding the best route. This is the familiar distinction between means and ends. Yet in politics, Richardson continues, we often lack a map of potential destinations before we embark on the journey. It is only as bureaucrats set out to work that we develop a sense of where we could go. So the backseat control of the legislature looks closer to this: "Take me to a nice place for having a picnic" (p. 227). That the legislature has the authority to change course with the destination in sight—"No, no, take me somewhere *peaceful and green* for a picnic" (p. 227)—doesn't change the fact that it is effectively dependent on the reasoning and experimentation of administrative agencies.

There is more. Even if we restrict our attention to cases in which the ends set by the legislature are clear, the compliance model fails to acknowledge that the implementation of public policy brings into play a distinctive set of normative considerations. These considerations are not goals but standards, and they pertain not to what the state does but to how it does it (Zacka 2017a, pp. 20–23). When agents of the democratic state interact with the public, we expect them to provide services in a way that upholds values central to our democratic political culture. At a minimum, this means treating citizens in a manner that is efficient, fair, responsive, and respectful; yet these values often point in competing directions, and knowing which to prioritize and when calls for context-specific judgment. Reducing the scope of administrative discretion in such situations would be undesirable, for it would make the state less able to be responsive to the particularities of citizens' circumstances and needs in ways that do justice to the normative commitments it is meant to embody (Zacka 2017a, pp. 48–65).

There are at least three ways, then, of capturing what is wrong with the compliance model of bureaucratic responsibility. One could argue, as Thompson does, that the model fails as a guide to

criticism and reform in current, nonideal conditions. It distracts from what really matters because it "directs attention more to whether bureaucrats follow prescribed procedures than to whether they make proper substantive judgments" (Thompson 2005, p. 55). One might go further and argue that the problems with the compliance model are not limited to nonideal conditions, for they would persist in any conceivable world. The issue, at heart, is that the compliance model presupposes an understanding of the division of labor between the legislature and the executive that is not practically feasible. As such, the model is silent when it comes to offering normative guidance to administrative agencies that have no choice but to grapple with the question of how to set ends. Alternatively, one might eschew the question of feasibility and challenge the compliance model more directly, for failing to sufficiently appreciate the desirability of administrative power—either because of the consequences it brings about or because it enables administrative agencies to act in ways that are more consonant with the values of liberal democracy. All three arguments militate, albeit for different reasons, in favor of thinking of public administration as having its own, "independent source of political authority" (Heath 2020, p. 20). But how could such authority, which is wielded by unelected officials, be legitimate according to the tenets of liberal democracy?

THE LEGITIMACY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

To answer this question, scholars have proposed different ways of grounding the legitimacy of public administration that underscore its compatibility with liberal democratic values.

Outputs

One way to create space for administrative power within normative theories of the state is to point to its beneficial effects. Scharpf (1998) does so by distinguishing between input and output legitimacy: The first is secured by the pedigree of an agency and corresponds to the idea of government by the people; the second flows from the outputs an agency produces, and corresponds to the idea of government for the people. What democratic legitimacy administrative agencies lack in terms of input, they can make up in terms of output by serving the public interest.

If what is meant by legitimacy is the perception of legitimacy, this account is indeed plausible. Most people appear to evaluate the state according to what it does (e.g., Tyler 2006; Rosanvallon 2011, pp. 171–77; Rothstein 2011). As a normative theory of legitimacy, however, this account suffers from two limitations. Unless one is a strict consequentialist, pointing to beneficial effects alone is not enough to establish the right to rule (Cordelli 2020, p. 8). Besides, how can one arrive at a specification of the public interest without consulting the people? Isn't that what elections are for, and how could one hope to short-circuit the process? It would seem that a theory of administrative legitimacy that aspires to be democratic cannot so readily disconnect inputs from outputs.

Expertise

Richardson (2002) cuts through this issue by constraining the scope of administrative authority. Rather than pitting inputs against outputs, he focuses on the conversion from the former to the latter. On his view, the legislature remains the final arbiter of the public interest, but the guidance it provides is bound to remain underdeterminate. As a result, administrative agencies inherit the considerable responsibility of specifying the ends set by the legislature. Specification, however, entails more than the selection of means. As Christiano (2005, p. 215) puts it, summarizing Richardson's view, "When we specify an end, we end up with a new end that is more concrete and susceptible to causal reasoning than the initial vague ends but that in some way realizes the initial

ends." Crucially, the specified end is not deductively implied by the initial ends. If it were, public administration would be wholly subordinate to the legislature, and there would be no need for it to have independent legitimacy.

Richardson (2002) offers the following example. In the 1970s, the US Congress mandated two vague ends: "making public transportation systems available to the disabled and avoiding discrimination against the disabled" (p. 107). The Department of Transportation specified these ends by making existing transportation systems accessible to the disabled, a process of mainstreaming. This new end is not entailed by the initial ends (one might have thought instead of providing specifically tailored means of transportation for the disabled), but it "provides a way of making the two cohere well with each other" (p. 108; for an interesting implication regarding administrative and policy reform, see Badano 2020).

But why should administrative agencies be authorized to specify ends? Richardson (2005) appeals here to the familiar criterion of agency expertise, but with a twist. Such expertise, he insists, is not just technical or instrumental but also moral and evaluative. "Regulators who work on an issue such as transportation for the disabled," he writes, "can come to have a good sense of what constitutes an important and reasonable goal in that policy domain. This sense can arise from years of mediating factional disputes and attempting to craft policies that respond to principled concerns without imposing excessive costs" (Richardson 2005, p. 229).

Liberal Credentials

While Richardson (2005) proposes a theory of administrative legitimacy that remains largely deferential to the legislature, Heath (2020) underscores the extent to which administrative agencies are justified in standing their own ground. He argues that the authority of public administration is grounded not in democracy but in liberalism. Like the judiciary, public administration has an important countermajoritarian role to play. This view echoes a position developed long ago by Rohr (1989), who saw public administration as a custodian of constitutional values. These are values that are central to the liberal democratic order but that remain largely beyond the scope of democratic contestation. Like Rohr, Heath (2020, p. 82) presents a picture of the permanent civil service as being politically neutral yet having a "'job to do,' one that can be specified independently of the particular wishes of the government of the day."

A central feature of Heath's (2020) book *The Machinery of Government* is that it does not seek to derive the legitimacy of public administration from existing philosophical theories. It aims, rather, to provide a rational reconstruction of the commitments that guide how civil servants already conduct themselves [in this way, it bears resemblance to Mashaw's (1985) *Bureaucratic Justice*]. In doing so, Heath recovers a form of normativity—an "ethos"—that is internal to the world of civil servants but that reflects a commitment to the principles of liberalism.

Heath's (2020, pp. 187–253) discussion of cost–benefit analysis (CBA), now a ubiquitous procedure in administrative agencies, illustrates his approach. While CBA is often dismissed by political philosophers as a form of applied utilitarianism, Heath argues that it is used by administrative agencies in a more limited range of cases, to identify and correct for instances of market failure (p. 190). Cast in this light, CBA's underlying rationale is Paretian rather than utilitarian. Heath suggests that Pareto improvement, in turn, is a form of efficiency that honors two central liberal commitments—to liberal neutrality and to citizen equality. It honors liberal neutrality because it seeks to bring about an outcome that is better for all according to their own conception of the good. It honors citizen equality because in areas of reasonable disagreement the state must assign equal weight to the preferences of each citizen while taking into account the strength of these preferences. This can be done by adopting a common metric of value such as money, one that we

have "good reason to think will be valued roughly the same by all parties" (pp. 194–95). Bureaucrats can thus be committed to CBA without violating the requirement of political neutrality, because it reflects a commitment to liberal principles that are beyond the scope of democratic contestation.

Democratic Credentials

Unlike Heath, Rosanvallon (2011) maintains in *Democratic Legitimacy* that the authority of public administration is grounded not in its liberal but in its democratic credentials. This is an arresting claim, since civil servants are not elected. Emphasizing their democratic credentials means demoting elections from the pedestal they often occupy in democratic theory, which is what Rosanvallon sets out to do. On his view, what gives democratic government legitimacy is its claim to capture the general will. Yet as a selection procedure, elections fall short: All they capture is the will of the majority. There is no magic bullet here. The best we can do, and what democratic regimes have in fact done, is to develop a range of institutions that each attempt to capture the general will in distinctive ways. None will succeed perfectly, but together they can compensate for one another's weaknesses. This amounts to a pluralization of the sources of democratic legitimacy, each grounded in a distinctive claim to capturing social generality.

Rosanvallon observes that for a long time in France, high-level civil servants rivaled elected politicians as embodiments of social generality. While politicians were chosen by the ballot box, the high civil service, selected for its competence and devoted to a life of public service, was thought to represent the public interest. These claims have since become more suspect, but new forms of legitimacy have emerged through which administrative agencies can reestablish their democratic credentials. Rosanvallon writes of the "legitimacy of impartiality" to describe the ideal of an institution that cannot be appropriated by political forces—a form of negative generality. And he writes of the "legitimacy of proximity" to describe the ideal of an institution concerned with doing justice to the uniqueness of individual situations—a form of generalized attention to particularity. To the extent that administrative agencies approach these ideals, they can claim not just legitimacy but democratic legitimacy.

To some, this argument may raise the specter of Rousseau. Isn't there a danger in divorcing claims to democratic legitimacy from what the people say? What would prevent public administration from discarding people's views, since it has a direct intimation of the general will? Rosanvallon (2018) addresses this worry in a subsequent book, *Good Government*. There, he claims that the autonomy of the executive calls for a permanent democracy—one in which the day-to-day management of state affairs is subject to both scrutiny and input by citizens.

This picture of a bureaucratic apparatus open to and in conversation with society has recently been endorsed by other democratic theorists. Warren (2009) observes that much of the recent institutional innovation in democracy has shifted from the realm of elections to the development and administration of public policy. To capture this trend, he invokes "governance-driven democratization." Mansbridge (2018, 2020) maintains that at the heart of democracy is the idea of giving a law to oneself. One crucial feature of doing that, in a collective enterprise, is communicating one's views, being heard, and having these views considered adequately—a process of reciprocal and iterative communication between citizens and representatives that she terms "recursive representation." Since lawmaking does not stop with the legislature but continues in administrative agencies, Mansbridge maintains that we need to expand the demand for recursive representation to the executive branch.

Boswell, Corbett, Emerson, and Rahman go further, arguing not only that bureaucracy should be more permeable to public input but that bureaucracy actually presents an opportunity for democracy (see also Klein 2020, who sees welfare institutions as a crucial site of democratic

politics). Boswell & Corbett's (2018) argument centers on the phenomenon of policy feedback—the idea that the way in which policies are enacted can affect the broader political capacities of citizens by empowering and resourcing them or, alternatively, by rendering them voiceless or cowed. They suggest that reforming bureaucracies to afford greater possibilities for citizen input can usher in a positive feedback loop, multiplying the sites in which affected citizens can weigh in on administrative decision making and enhancing their capacity for deliberation. Building on the ideas of Progressive Era reformers, Rahman (2016, p. 15) suggests that "while elections and legislatures have long had a pride of place in democratic theory, . . .thickening our democratic capacities and experience requires that we turn instead to front-line institutions of governance, such as regulatory agencies," a view shared by Emerson (2019). One reason for this is that by involving citizens in decision making on concrete issues that affect them, administrative agencies can contribute to enhancing their sense of political agency in ways that would be difficult for elections to reproduce, since one's personal voice and sense of efficacy might end up diluted in a sea of ballots and policy items.

Acting in Our Name

While the authors discussed so far emphasize the substantive principles and procedures that ground the legitimacy of public administration, Cordelli (2020) insists in *The Privatized State* that it matters not only how public policy is implemented but also by whom and for what reasons. Cordelli offers on this ground a radical critique of the increasingly widespread privatization of the administrative functions of government. The problem with privatization, on her view, is not that it commodifies the services provided, that it is driven by objectionable motivations, or that it brings about undesirable consequences, but rather that it renders us systematically dependent upon the unilateral will of others.

To avoid the charge of unilateralism, Cordelli (2020, pp. 156–95) maintains that discretionary decisions made by public administrators must, among other things, be made "in our name"—a form of "representative agency." To act "in our name," she explains, is not simply to act within the bounds of one's mandate but to avoid acting on the basis of reasons positively excluded from that mandate (p. 15). Yet there are structural features of work in private organizations that make it difficult—indeed, possibly wrong—for private actors to exclude such reasons. For one, private actors have a fiduciary duty to take into account their organizations' bottom line (if they are in the for-profit sector) or their organizations' mission (if they are in the nonprofit sector). They are bound, in other words, to take into account considerations that they—as our representative agents—ought to ignore. However commendable their actions may be, they derive from reasons that are not fully ours. As such, they are the expression of a private or unilateral will and cannot be legitimate.

Directions for Future Scholarship

As the preceding discussion suggests, valuable progress has been made in articulating a range of plausible foundations for the legitimacy of public administration. There is much to be learned still by bringing these perspectives in closer conversation and exploring the attractions of hybrid models. Cordelli (2020, p. 111–13), for instance, has recently defended an integrative model of administrative legitimacy that combines both liberal and democratic credentials and has sketched an institutional manifestation of it in the form of codetermination (bureaucrats develop and propose regulations, which are then subject to veto by a jury of citizens).

As theorists evaluate the merits of such proposals, they will need to pay greater attention to the differences social scientists have drawn between types of bureaucracies (Wilson 1989, Carpenter

2020) and consider carefully whether normative theories of legitimacy need to be sensitive to such distinctions. Future scholarship will also have to contend more directly with a range of findings from the social sciences that seem to run against liberal democratic sensibilities. As mentioned above, several studies have shown that when it comes to trust and perceptions of legitimacy, people seem to care more about institutions getting things done (outputs) than about having a say in directing the actions of such institutions (inputs). For theorists writing in a democratic vein, it is tempting to dismiss such empirical findings as betraying misguided perceptions of legitimacy, or to presume that they are in the last resort compatible with liberal democratic commitments. But might the challenge be more profound? Could these findings invite a critique of the hold of liberal democracy on our normative theories of legitimacy?

GOOD GOVERNMENT

Say that we have settled the question of the legitimate authority of public administration. How should such authority be exercised? This is the question of good government or good governance (I use the terms here interchangeably, but see Bevir 2010 for an account of the difference). Political theorists sometimes collapse the distinction between legitimacy and good government, but as Kirby & Wolff (2021) have recently argued, there is value to keeping the two analytically separate: One can be authorized to govern yet govern poorly, and one can govern well without being authorized to do so.

Good government is not the same as good public policy. It refers instead to the way in which programs are administered—including practices for performance measurement, incentivization, organizational socialization and training, cultivation of organizational culture, contracting, interagency cooperation, and oversight. The question of good government has received far less attention in political theory than the question of good public policy, yet empirical studies suggest that we should care about the two for many of the same reasons. How a program is administered can have implications that are distributive, determining who gets what, when, and how; expressive, heightening feelings of deservingness or stigma; and formative, "shaping the things publics believe and want, the ways citizens view themselves and others, and how they understand and act toward the political system" (Mettler & Soss 2004, p. 55; see also Soss et al. 2011, Campbell 2012, Brodkin 2013, Van Berkel et al. 2017, Herd & Moynihan 2018).

What, then, does good government consist in? Some desiderata are not particularly contentious. At a minimum, administrative power should be accountable, responsive to relevant parties, and subject to safeguards (e.g., Thompson 2005). Among other things, this means that good government should be as transparent as possible in its reasoning and decision making, attentive to the concerns of affected parties, respectful of due process, and open to judicial review. These desiderata may be simple to articulate in the abstract but prove more complex and controversial when rendered concrete (e.g., Mashaw 1985). Take the criterion of responsiveness to affected parties. Orren & Skowronek (2017) have claimed that in the United States the increased participation of various branches of government in administrative decision making has failed to rein in administrative agencies. Instead, it has led to the cooptation of other branches of government into the logic of policy making—whereby every consideration is a chip that can be traded against another—thereby eroding constitutional protections. Or take the question of judicial review. Scholars of American administrative law have been embroiled in a long-running debate about the standards that courts should use to review administrative decisions and whether they have been too deferential (e.g., Ernst 2014, Hamburger 2014, Vermeule 2016, Sunstein & Vermeule 2020; for an overview, see Tushnet 2021). Judicial oversight is actually becoming even more complex because administrative agencies increasingly govern not through full-blown, binding regulation but rather

through "guidance"—tentative statements "advising the public on how the agency proposes to exercise discretion or interpret law" (Parrillo 2019, p. 167). Such guidance can take the form of "advisories, circulars, bulletins, memos, interpretive letters, enforcement manuals, FAQs. . ." (p. 167), which largely evade notice and comment requirements on account of their provisionality. The challenge for courts is to find a way to review guidance without hindering the experimentation and flexibility it allows (Kessler & Sabel 2021; for a parallel argument in the realm of street-level bureaucracy, see Piore 2011, Honig 2018).

Setting aside such complexities, most scholars agree that robust checks on administrative power will have to feature in any plausible conception of good or even legitimate government. Several have pointed out, moreover, that these checks must be plural to encompass different aspects of administrative behavior, combining legislative oversight, direct accountability to affected parties, and horizontal answerability to peers and within the ambit of professional communities (e.g., Hupe & Hill 2007; Zacka 2017a, pp. 152–99; Zacka 2019, pp. 457–59). Yet checks can only take us so far. To guide practice, an account of good government would also need to offer positive guidance to orient the exercise of administrative power. What might provide such orientation? Broadly speaking, the answers have fallen into three clusters, depending on whether they stress procedural requirements, propose to involve the public, or promote a substantive conception of the public interest.

Procedural accounts of good government remain neutral with respect to the ends that administrative agencies are directed to pursue, focusing instead on their performance in meeting such ends. The most common procedural account of good government stresses efficiency (Agnafors 2013). More recently, Rothstein & Teorell (2008) have articulated an influential alternative that centers around impartiality. Inspired by feminist ethics, Stensöta (2010) and Engster (2020) have argued that good government should revolve instead around a duty of care for those who depend on it. These approaches all capture important considerations. A concern for efficiency stems from the recognition that public resources are limited and should be used responsibly; impartiality is tied to the ideals of the rule of law and fairness; and an ethics of care is called for by the power differential between bureaucrats and clients.

Procedural accounts, however, have been criticized on two counts. First, their neutrality with respect to policy ends appears to yield counterintuitive implications (Agnafors 2013, pp. 435–36). Imagine that policy goals were profoundly misguided or dangerous. Would good government really consist in striving to attain them efficiently, impartially, and with care? Second, procedural accounts are bound to remain incomplete (Kirby 2021b). This is because they presuppose a background of clear policy ends. As discussed above, however, the goals administrative agencies inherit are often vague or ambiguous. In such situations—where guidance is most needed—procedural accounts fall silent.

One way to rescue procedural accounts from the charge of incompleteness is to argue that they are necessary but not sufficient components of good government, a minimal bar of sorts. Scholars of institutional corruption have made an important contribution to our understanding of what else it would take for an institution to meet such a bar (Thompson 2018). Going beyond individual accounts of corruption, such as bribery and extortion, they have emphasized that it is possible for an institution to be corrupt—that is, to exhibit pernicious patterns of dependence that undermine its effectiveness—even if individual officeholders are clear of corrupt motives. As Thompson (2018, p. 496) puts it, institutional corruption "exploits legitimate institutional practices that provide benefits that even an uncorrupted institution needs." Campaign fundraising, for instance, can serve a legitimate function and be pursued by well-intentioned politicians. At the same time, however, it can introduce pernicious patterns of dependence that undermine the

democratic process (see Lessig 2013; on the question of individual responsibility, see Ceva & Ferretti 2021). Similar dynamics can be at play in the administrative state.

Theories of institutional corruption alert us to forms of dependence that should be avoided. But this is still, in essence, a side constraint on the exercise of power. How should administrative agencies wield the authority they have left? According to representative and participatory theories of bureaucracy, agencies should move forward by involving the public. One way to do so is to represent the public within administrative agencies; another is to give the public a say in how such agencies operate. For proponents of representative bureaucracy, "it is not the power of public bureaucracies per se, but their unrepresentative power, that constitutes the greatest threat to democratic government" (Krislov & Rosenbloom 1981, p. 21). They maintain that "bureaucratic power can be made more responsive to the public if the personnel who staff administrative agencies reflect the demographic characteristics of the public they serve" (Sowa & Selden 2003, p. 700). For proponents of participatory government, who might look favorably upon Rosanvallon's vision of a permanent democracy, the public should remain outside administrative agencies but play one of two roles, providing input to decision makers or serving as the ultimate decision maker.

Critics have pointed out, however, that representation or participation in bureaucracy would inevitably give rise to "all the traditional problems of democratic theory" (Kirby 2021b). How can we be sure that the voices represented are indeed representative, or that participation will not morph into tyranny of the majority or co-optation by a vocal minority? Doing representation or participation well would entail contending with many of the same issues raised by elections, from which the vague and ambiguous mandates came in the first place. Would administrative agencies have the resources to tackle this challenge, and why would the result be different this time around?

As an alternative to procedural, representative, and participatory accounts, some have proposed to conceive of good government as promoting a substantive view of the public interest. According to scholars associated with New Public Administration, a good administrator is concerned with promoting social equity (Frederickson 1980). He or she "actively intervenes to enhance the political power and economic well-being of disadvantaged minorities in order to redress the neglect suffered by such minorities at the hands of the customary procedures of representative democracy" (Rohr 1989, p. 64). The problem with such activist conceptions of good government is that they rest on political commitments that are profoundly controversial (Kirby & Wolff 2021, p. 44). While bureaucrats are endowed with discretion, Kirby and Wolff observe that we "do not expect most bureaucrats, most of the time[,] to act on the basis of their own substantive conception of justice, even if correct" (p. 44).

Should bureaucrats embrace instead a theory of justice like that of Rawls, which aspires to be neutral with respect to conceptions of the good (e.g., Applbaum 1999, pp. 68–69)? The problem is that even if we assume that such theories are thin enough to be widely acceptable, this is bought at the price of an abstraction that greatly reduces their usefulness as a guide for conduct in the practical situations bureaucrats confront (Heath 2020, p. 81). Heath suggests there may be a way around this concern because liberal principles are already institutionalized in the practices of the welfare state, including in the workplace culture and professional ethic of the civil service. As a result, one can adopt a reconstructive approach (p. 81), using abstract liberal principles as a way of articulating many of the implicit commitments of public administration but also of guiding its practices in the direction of more consistent adherence to those principles. Yet, here too, the prospect of reasonable disagreement surfaces when things get concrete. As Heath is well aware, there is a difference between saying that there is a plausible liberal interpretation of CBA and saying that this is the best interpretation of it—or indeed that CBA is the best way to honor liberal commitments.

While competing conceptions of good government continue to be proposed and refined (see, e.g., Heywood & Kirby 2020 and Kirby 2021a on the notion of public integrity), it is important to note that progress can also be made negatively, by understanding the ways in which public administration can undermine policy goals or betray values a democratic state is meant to uphold. Here political theorists can work hand in hand with social scientists to critically interrogate the distributive, expressive, and formative implications of program administration, which have tended to be eclipsed in political theory by discussions of institutional design and policy making. The goals are both to identify avenues of moral concern that may not be readily apparent or anticipated before policy is implemented and to diagnose the reasons why they arise.

To give an example from the realm of political theory, consider Wolff's (1998) discussion of "shameful revelation." Wolff coined the term to describe situations in which one must disclose something one considers shameful about oneself as a condition for receiving public assistance. Wolff asks us to imagine "the case of someone who is unemployed at a time of low unemployment and no particular shortage of jobs" (p. 113). To qualify for benefits, they would need to make a convincing case that they are "a failure, unable to gain employment even when there is no difficulty for others" (p. 114), an ordeal that is both humiliating and demeaning, and one that contributes to undermining the "social bases of self-respect" (Rawls 1971). Wolff draws from this an argument against welfare conditionality, but his analysis also provokes us to reflect on how the administration of welfare programs may alleviate, or aggravate, the concern of shameful revelation. Would changing the way in which the questions are asked or moving them to a virtual interface make a difference, and why? Are there ways of engendering plausible deniability that might enable clients to save face or, more ambitiously perhaps, to shore up self-respect? The broader point is that we do not need to wait until we have a fully fledged ideal of good government to diagnose shortcomings in program administration, and to set out thinking about, and experimenting with, possible remedies.

THE MORAL AGENCY OF BUREAUCRATS

If it is to be more than a pious wish, any conception of good government needs bureaucrats to bring it to life. What kind of moral agents must these bureaucrats be, and what challenges must they overcome along the way? This is the question of moral agency. We can make progress on it independently from the question of good government by building on ecumenical foundations—focusing on moral capacities that would be required by most reasonable accounts of good government.

There is a running thread in twentieth-century social and political thought on the adverse effects of bureaucracy on moral agency. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, in particular, a large body of research crystallized that saw bureaucracy as complicit in what Arendt [2006 (1963)] famously termed "the banality of evil." By encouraging deference to hierarchy, punctilious rule following, and adherence to repetitive routines, while placing bureaucrats at a physical and symbolic remove from the people affected by their actions, bureaucracy was faulted for fostering an ethos of blind compliance, a gradual surrender of one's capacity to think and act independently, and perhaps above all a desensitization to the plight of others (Bauman 1989, Glover 2000).

This view of bureaucracy, as an embodiment of instrumental rationality run amok, has had a lasting grip on the scholarly and popular imagination. Yet according to Paul Du Gay's (2000) *In Praise of Bureaucracy*, it rests on a faulty interpretation of the historical record. Du Gay argues that what happened under the Nazis was not the pinnacle of bureaucratization, but a move away from the strictures of bureaucracy and its permeation, and perversion, by an ethics of ultimate

ends. His central claim is that it would be wrong—and a serious misreading of Weber—to treat the ethos of bureaucratic office as a form of amoral instrumentalism. Bureaucratic ethics does indeed require "the cultivation of indifference towards certain ultimate moral ends," but Du Gay insists that "this indifference is founded upon an awareness of the irreducible plurality of and frequent incommensurability between passionately held, 'ultimate' moral ends and thus on the possible consequences and costs (read 'long range effects') of pursuing one of them at the expense of the others" (p. 54).

Achieving indifference toward ultimate moral ends, moreover, is a considerable achievement: It requires a supreme kind of ethical discipline, a form of self-denial, through which bureaucrats learn to bracket their most profound commitments (Du Gay 2000, p. 120; on conflicts between personal and role morality, see Applbaum 1999). According to Du Gay, this achievement is fragile and hard won, the result of techniques of the self and institutional arrangements that can be undermined by new managerial practices imported from the private sector that fail to recognize the distinctiveness of the ethical lifeworld that bureaucrats in the public service occupy (pp. x, 4). Du Gay & Vikkelsø (2017) note in this spirit that it has become fashionable in organization studies to champion informality and dismiss formal structure as a relic of the past. According to them, this is a mistake: It is thanks to the regimentation of bureaucratic work that discretion can flourish in a controlled manner and, more importantly perhaps, that bureaucrats develop the restrained ethos on which public administration depends.

Another way to take issue with the traditional view of the adverse relationship between bureaucracy and moral agency is to observe that it rests—like the compliance model of bureaucratic responsibility—on a misleading portrait of how bureaucracies function most of the time. Bureaucracies are, to use the apt phrase of Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2003, p. 10), "rule saturated but not rule bound." The ends that bureaucrats inherit, even at the street level, are typically underdeterminate, and bureaucrats must uphold a range of process values that often conflict. This yields considerable scope for value-laden discretionary judgment in the routine of everyday work. As Shaw (1992) puts it, bureaucracy is a site of "institutionalized phronesis." One implication is something I propose to call the sweet curse of professionalism. Discretion elevates workers and imparts gravity and meaning to what they do. Yet at the same time, it implicates them personally and makes them complicit in the limitations of the system they embody, for they become involved in it not just as operators but as thinking and reasoning agents (Zacka 2017b). With this comes a more acute sense of personal responsibility.

This is the starting point for my book, *When the State Meets the Street* (Zacka 2017a), which attempts to map the moral and psychological terrain that street-level bureaucrats must navigate to deliver public services in a way that upholds democratic values. In order to capture the dilemmas of frontline work, the book builds on participant observation conducted over a period of 8 months as a receptionist in an antipoverty agency. In doing so, it aims to demonstrate the potential of practicing a form of political theory that pays attention to reconstructing and critically interrogating the lived experience of situated agents.

To understand the challenges of everyday work at the frontlines of public service, I step back from the moment of ethical decision making to consider the moral dispositions street-level bureaucrats bring to work, and how these dispositions are affected by the pressures they encounter at work. I argue that street-level bureaucrats are caught in a predicament. The proper implementation of public policy depends on their capacity to remain attuned to a plural landscape of democratic values. Yet in the midst of a work routine characterized by chronic shortages of staff, limited resources, and emotionally charged face-to-face encounters with clients, such a mandate all too often translates into having to choose between options all of which involve a poignant

sense of loss.[2] Not everyone can receive the attention they need or deserve, and some clients will inevitably be left to fend for themselves; frontline workers must decide which ones. Making such unhappy choices repeatedly is not only cognitively demanding but also morally disquieting. This triggers a range of coping responses, many of which involve a simplification of the moral landscape. Being unable to live up to the plural demands of the role, frontline workers tend over time to narrow their understanding of these demands so as to be able to live up to them. This is the moral counterpart to the coping strategies that Lipsky [2010 (1980)] described long ago to explain how street-level bureaucrats cope with the sometimes impossible demands placed on them (imposing administrative burdens, rationing services, creaming easy cases, etc.).

What emerges from this study (Zacka 2017a) is a revised picture of why the relationship between bureaucracy and moral agency is tenuous. If everyday work at the front lines of public service undermines moral agency, it is not because bureaucrats must mechanically apply rules at a remove from clients, but because they must shoulder day in, day out the weight of difficult discretionary decisions in close proximity to clients. This leaves public service agencies in a bind: The case for discretion at the street level is predicated on bureaucrats' capacity to exert judgment along different dimensions of value, yet the conditions of work encourage a drift toward reductive moral dispositions. To address this predicament, I argue that public service agencies must look beyond institutional design and normative principles to foster a moral ecology consisting of practices at the individual, group, and managerial levels that can support street-level bureaucrats in mitigating the pressures of everyday work and in making good use of the moral simplifications that will nonetheless arise.

As a body of work, the scholarship on moral agency manifests a commitment to recovering "a certain ethical dignity" for a category of social actors, bureaucrats, "that have been the target of considerable critical denigration in recent years" (Du Gay 2000, p. ix). The qualifier "moral" is important here, because it calls attention to the fact that public service workers shoulder a significant burden on behalf of society, one that often goes unrecognized. Beyond that, this body of research also calls attention to the moral ecology of bureaucratic labor—the practices of the self, peer-level dynamics, managerial styles, organizational culture—that play a central role in sustaining bureaucrats as moral agents within the formal structure they inhabit. It extends an invitation to future scholars to examine more systematically, along with virtue ethicists, the organizational environments or forms of life that can sustain the desired moral dispositions among administrative agents. Finally, this body of work opens up resources for a bottom-up normative theory of the state (Zacka 2017a, p. 254), one that starts with the challenges of service delivery, and the dispositions adequate to shoulder them responsibly, and that works its way back to the work environments and policy measures that must be in place to enable bureaucrats to rise to the occasion.

FABRICATING THE STATE

The last body of research that I discuss in this review has its center of gravity in anthropology and sociology. It draws attention to how our understanding of the state would change if we were to apprehend it as most members of the public do, through the everyday practices of administrative agencies. Its main contribution to political theory is a series of problematizing redescriptions— accounts of political phenomena that destabilize the lens through which we traditionally study

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[2]Levinson (2015), writing about teachers, goes as far as to borrow the language of moral injury from the experience of warfare to describe the sense of moral loss and associated psychological toll.

them, engendering novel questions and exposing new avenues of moral concern (Shapiro 2002, Longo & Zacka 2019).

In ordinary speech, the state often figures as a subject of actions: It embarks on infrastructure projects, collects taxes, and issues regulations (Bourdieu 2014, p. 10; Weller 2018, p. 5). Anthropologists and sociologists of the state caution against such turns of phrase because they presuppose the existence of an entity, the state, whereas the challenge as they see it is precisely to articulate "how an 'itness' is attributed to the state" (Mathur 2016, p. 5). As a way forward, they propose to approach the state very concretely, in quasi-phenomenological fashion—as it is "substantiated in people's lives through the apparently banal practices of bureaucracies" (Sharma & Gupta 2006, p. 11; see also Fassin et al. 2015). This involves revisiting the everyday world of street-level bureaucrats, but with a different perspective than the literature spawned by Lipsky [2010 (1980)]. The goal is not to understand the factors that shape how agents of the state use their discretion but rather to understand how we go from the actions of a collection of particular individuals to the idea of a supraindividual entity, the state, that supposedly stands at an equal distance from all. This is a transubstantiation that scholars steeped in the analysis of rituals do not hesitate to describe as a form of "magic" (Das 2004) or "alchemy" (Bourdieu 2014, pp. 33–34).

The traditional democratic picture, Bourdieu tells us in his lectures at the Collège de France (delivered in 1989–1992 but only translated into English in 2014), posits that there is first a body of citizens who then express themselves in a government to which they delegate power. An individual becomes an agent of the state by being appointed through a chain of delegation. According to Bourdieu (2014, p. 32), however, this picture is highly misleading: It involves "an unconscious reversal of cause and effect that is typical of the logic of fetishism." Rather than thinking of the authority of public administration as deriving from the people, Bourdieu argues that we should consider instead how agents of the state construct and amass practical and symbolic resources that they then draw upon to justify their distinctive claim to authority. The state, according to him, is a collective fiction (p. 6), and the standing of bureaucrats depends on whether they can sustain it. The state arises at the same time as, and through the efforts of, a class of people who have an interest in disinterestedness (p. 3).

The idea of the state as an effect of practices is familiar in political science from the work of Mitchell (1991). Bourdieu (2014), however, takes a different approach. Rather than stress the constitutive role of disciplines, as Mitchell does, he emphasizes the performativity of bureaucratic practices—their capacity to bring about the impartial, disinterested standpoint from which they supposedly emanate. In particular, he underscores the significance of everyday processes of theatricalization. The titles that agents of the state adorn, the sometimes obsolete proceedings and dress codes that mark them out, the rooms in which we meet them—all signal to the public that they are meant to be representative of a distinctive ethical register. These accoutrements also remind officials of the standards they must uphold if they are to continue claiming authority. So long as both parties partake in the obsequium (Bourdieu 2014, p. 34), "paying homage to the official" (p. 36)—which they do even when acting hypocritically or denouncing particular individuals for falling short of the standards of the office—they contribute to bringing about the fiction of the office, a form of alchemy.

Bourdieu's work stands as a provocation to rethink how we conceptualize the state. Are the categories we use to speak about the state complicit in reifying it? What would it mean to take seriously the idea that the state is a collective fiction engendered by the ordinary performances of its agents, and could we still hold on to our normative theories of legitimacy and democracy if that turned out to be true?

Recent research in the anthropology and sociology of the state also calls attention to the significance of bureaucratic artifacts—such as furniture, documents, and buildings. Researchers inspired

by Actor–Network Theory (Latour 2005, p. 39) see such artifacts not as intermediaries but as mediators "that transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry." Apprehending the role of artifacts requires a shift in descriptive practices. Rather than follow the actions of a bureaucrat, one might instead trace the trajectory of a file that moves through an administrative agency, as Latour (2010) does in his ethnography of the Conseil d'État, the highest French administrative court. This reveals a new topography: As files progress through desks and rooms, change floors, enter and exit the archives, they enlist specific competencies and assemble around them various constituencies while excluding others.

Latour's core insight is that instead of studying how particular fields, such as administration or the law, are influenced by society (which is of course always the case), it is often more enlightening to think about such fields as having their own logic, mobilizing distinctive artifacts and reassembling the world around them into novel configurations. One implication is that artifacts and the practices they summon, when set in motion, have some measure of autonomy. They are not always at the service of those who wield them but can prove recalcitrant. Both Nayanika Mathur (2016) and Matthew Hull (2012) describe administrative agencies in India and Pakistan brought to a halt not by incompetent or corrupt bureaucrats but by zealous adherence to the state's own documentary practices, with the production of paperwork taking a momentum of its own.

While Latour, Mathur, and Hull are interested in the social life of documents, Jean-Marc Weller (2018) has examined the ways in which administrative files shape how agents of the state see a case. His point of departure is that a file is a necessarily fragmentary portrait of a situation. But which fragments are considered important, and how are they assembled? Building on multisited ethnographic fieldwork in French administrative offices, and drawing on the work of scholars of modern managerial systems (e.g., Yates 1989), Weller proposes the beginnings of a typology. He distinguishes between files that contain detailed historical documentation, enabling bureaucrats to look backward, and files that contain snippets of information that can shed light on the potential consequences of an administrative decision, enabling bureaucrats to look ahead; or between files comprising documents that together can recreate a narrative about what happened and files comprising documents that can instead facilitate a mathematical calculation. His typology reminds us that the files that supposedly serve bureaucrats also format reality for them.

If files participate in constituting and assembling fragments of the social world, the same is true for the architecture of government offices, a topic that Goodsell (1988, 2001) addressed some time ago, that Weller (2018) has broached more recently, and on which I am preparing a monograph. In it, I trace the evolution of the interior architecture of public employment offices in the long twentieth century and examine how changes made on symbolic, affective, and configurative registers participated in changing the relationship between citizens, bureaucrats, and the welfare state (Puff & Zacka 2022). Consider that something as mundane as the configuration of seats in a waiting room can orient everyone's gaze in the same direction, engendering common knowledge about how others are treated by agents of the state, or disperse lines of sight, rendering the space devoid of a clear focal point. Architecture can thus participate in making the experience of waiting for the state a shared occasion, or a more individuated one. In this and many other ways, the architecture of government offices plays a part in modulating the relationship between citizens and bureaucrats and in constituting the publics assembled there.

What can political theory draw from this turn to bureaucratic artifacts? Above all, perhaps, new objects of inquiry. If we want to understand and critically interrogate how bureaucracies work, how they see and are seen, we need to look beyond the dispositions of bureaucrats and the rules and procedures they must follow to consider the objects, spaces, and tools they rely on. This raises a conceptual and a normative question. At a conceptual level, we encounter a question that scholars of science and technology studies have long grappled with, specifically: How should

we understand the agency of things? This question matters from a normative standpoint because with agency comes responsibility. If artifacts do political work, then they are a proper object of normative and critical scrutiny. Which constituencies do documents assemble or exclude as they circulate through an office, and which should they? What do agents of a state see in a case, and what would we want them to see? What publics does architecture assemble or disperse, and to what effect? As administrative agencies transition to new digital interfaces and client management systems, these questions are a timely reminder that both agents of the state and citizens can find themselves constrained and constructed by the very tools that are supposedly at their service.

CONCLUSION

Public administration is once again a lively area of research in political theory. This resurgence of interest has occurred in conversation with the social sciences, which have provided a more nuanced understanding of how bureaucracies work, how they are perceived by the wider public, and how they in turn construct and perceive this very public. The insights for political theory have been many, ranging from the normative and interpretive to the critical and conceptual. Is it a coincidence that this interest has crystallized at a time when the administrative state is being transformed by practices imported from the private sector, with many of its traditional functions outsourced or depersonalized and relocated online? And does this make the study of bureaucratic models of public administration already antiquated or soon to be? I think the answer to both questions is no. We see and learn through contrast: It is when we start sensing the limitations of reforms that were until recently lauded as a cure-all that the meaning and attractions of more traditional models of public administration stand out most sharply. The challenge is to articulate these attractions without succumbing to the charms of nostalgia, not because they provide a blueprint for what we should demand of public administration in the future but because they contain important lessons regarding what we should remain vigilant about, and what we may reasonably hope from it.

DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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