Fred W. Riggs:

Contributions to the Study of Comparative Public Administration

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In 1962, the Ford Foundation presented the Comparative administration Group (CAG), a special division of the American Society for public Administration, with one-half million dollars to study methods for improving public administration in developing countries.

Public administration had passed recently through a period of widespread optimism about the power of administrative reform. Many practitioner-scholars believed that administration could be improved through the implementation of correct principles. Scarcely 25 years earlier Luther Gulick had suggested that experts were on the verge of discovering principles of administration as immutable as the laws of physics and chemistry. Scholars had rediscovered Woodrow Wilson's dictum that good administrative practices did not depend upon the type of regimen which they were practiced. The United States had achieved great success in reconstructing the economies of Europe and Asia through instruments such as the Marshall Plan. President John F. Kennedy had established the Peace Corps as a means of bringing "trained manpower" to less developed lands.

With these trends to inspire them, scholars both prominent and apprentice traveled to foreign countries to share their knowledge about public administration. Many arrived in countries newly emerging from the grip of colonialism and struggling to establish an indigenous civil service. It was a time, in the words of David Halberstam, when nations consulted "the best and the brightest" in their efforts to reform.

Young and old returned with stories of incredible misfortune. Especially in the developing nations, nothing seemed to work as planned. Local officials would construct institutions along Western lines, but those institutions would not operate like their counterparts in the industrialized world. Experts blamed resistance to change, lack of motivation, absence of skilled personnel, excessive bureaucratic autonomy, and simple corruption. No one seemed to possess a coherent explanation for why western management methods should fail with such predictable regularity.

One American scholar, returning from a period of study as a visiting professor at the Institute of Public Administration in the Philippines, stopped on his return journey at the Indian Institute of public Administration and delivered several lectures on "the ecology of public administration." News of the theory spread quickly among professionals in the field. Here was someone with a theory that explained the widespread transformation of Western management methods in developing countries. The scholar was Fred W. Riggs.

Upon his return, his colleagues elected him chair of the comparative Public Group. He held the position from 1960 to 1971. In spite of the intentions of the people at the Ford Foundation, who believed they would receive practical administrative methods, CAG became a forum for intellectuals attempting to understand in a systematic why administrative practices in non-Western countries diverged so widely from what were thought to be good and universal principles. The experience produced a deepening appreciation for the relationship between culture and administration, an appreciation that continues to transform political and administrative studies today.

The Individual

Riggs' own upbringing provided much of the inspiration for his ecological theory. Riggs was born in Kuling, China, a mountain resort on the Yangtze river in Kiangsi province, in 1917. His parents were American missionaries who had arrived in China in 1916 with the intent of helping peasants improve their farming methods.

Like many foreign experts to come after them, Riggs' parents carried in their heads an image based on Western models. If only the local people would farm scientifically, using modern methods, their problems would disappear and output would soar. The alternative to effective reform seemed to be economic and institutional stagnation. This was the same image that administrative experts would attempt to export forty years later. Said Riggs: Dad had an agricultural degree from Ohio State University and was confidence his technological knowledge would enable him to help Chinese farmers increase their productivity. As he later discovered, most American agricultural technics were irrelevant to the concrete realities of the Chinese situation.

Riggs observed the transformation of Western methods at an early age. American agricultural technology did not work in China, given prevailing conditions at that time. His family, however, did not leave China. The family stayed, where Riggs' father developed an indigenous approach to agricultural improvement based on local conditions and tools. Returning briefly to Cornell University to earn a graduate degree, the elder Riggs wrote a masters thesis dealing with agricultural reform under pre-industrial conditions. The overall experience strongly impressed the young Riggs.

In 1935 Fred Riggs came to the United State to study journalism and political science at the University of Illinois. He hoped to become a foreign correspondent, an impossible ambition given the economic depression still raging at that time. Graduating in 1938, he elected to stay in school, enrolling at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. He received his master's degree from the Fletcher School in 1941 and, after wartime public service assignments, completed his doctorate in political science with a specialization in international relations from Columbia University. He wrote his dissertation (published as a book in 1950) on the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Acts. Riggs took no formal course work in the area of public administration, an omission that turned out to be an advantage in the long run.

While writing his dissertation, and working at his first regular job, a research position with the Foreign Policy Association, Riggs began to observe the degree to which form and substance in the so-called"developing" countries did not correspond. In 1951 he took a position with the Public Administration Clearing House in New York, as an assistant to Rowland Egger, who had received a grant from the Ford Foundation to improve public administration world-wide. Delving quickly into the literature of public administration, Riggs was deeply suspicious of what he found. Virtually all of American public administration was deeply narcissistic: it idealized our administrative practices as though they had evolved independently without counterparts elsewhere, and offered universally relevant answers to the problems confronting the new states emerging around the world. In 1955-56, Riggs team-taught one of the first graduate seminars on comparative public administration as a visiting professor at Yale University. In 1956, he joined the faculty of the Government Department at Indiana University. In tentative form, he had begun to write about the consequences of intermingling contrasting systems in the modernizing world. To develop his ideas, he sought out overseas experience. In 1957-58 he did field work in Thailand, where he immersed himself in a study of government programs affecting rice. He continued his field studies in 1958-59, teaching at the newly created Philippine institute of Public Administration. By this time, his vision of the paradoxical nature of public administration in transitional societies had developed into an elaborate theory, complete with its own vocabulary. Articles appeared, followed by three influential books: *The Ecology of Public Administration* (1961), *Administration in Developing Countries: The Theory of Prismatic Society* (1964), and *Thailand: The Modernization of a Bureaucratic Polity* (1966).

The Theory

In presenting his theory of prismatic society, Riggs drew on a then-popular social science approach known as structural-functionalism. All societies perform certain functions: someone must settle disputes, someone must make rules, someone must cure disease, and someone must takeout the garbage. The need to perform functions such as these is universal. The structures by which the functions are accomplished differ enormously from society to society.

Generally speaking, traditional societies utilize only a few structures with which to perform these functions. The structures, to use the appropriate term, are fused. Industrial societies, by contrast, maintain a much larger number of structures with very specific functions. The process of modernization, from this perspective, involves increasing structural differentiation.

The leading proponent of structural-functionalism at that time was the Harvard sociologist Talcott Parsons. Parsons' writings, as any student who has struggled through them knows, are nearly unintelligible. Riggs theory was equally complex. To give his audience a mental picture of his ideas, Riggs searched for a simple analogy. He settled on phenomenon of light. Light as it arrives from a source like the sun is fused. All of the visible wave lengths are present, but they are combined into the single color white. Once separated, the individual colors appear as in the hues of a rainbow. One way by which light can be refracted into its separate colors is to use a prism. To Riggs, the white light represented the fused structures of a traditional society. The rainbow represented the diffracted (or refracted) structures of an industrialized society. Inside the prism was the society in transition.

Imagine a mid-point between traditional and industrialized society, Riggs allowed. "Let us call it the 'prismatic model' because of the prism which refracts fused light." To many, this model conjured an image of societies in a temporary state of transition between traditional agriculture and modern industrialization. This was a common misinterpretation. To Riggs, the prismatic society was not a passing inconvenience. It constituted a separate model in its own right, a third type with its own rules and culture. "The prismatic situation was neither traditional nor modern, but it contained novel elements generated by the juxtaposition of old and new social structures." Riggs rejected what he called the "escalator model" of modernization, which assumed that the prismatic characteristics would quickly disappear. To understand public administration in a prismatic society, Riggs insisted, one had to understand the particular features of that situation.

The most important feature was what Riggs called formalism. Hoping to benefit from the material goods of the outside world, leaders of transitional societies imported structures from industrialized countries. They borrowed banks and bureaus, markets and public enterprises. They prohibited old practices from the traditional society. The old traditions would remain, however, filtered through the new structures. Riggs warned that "most societies would adhere tenaciously to many of their most valued ancient traditions and cultural norms while simultaneously importing and accepting a facade of practices and patterns." Like a South seas cargocult, the societies would try to maintain their distinctive cultures while adopting formulas that promised to bring material goods.

When the American West was developing, people on the frontier constructed elaborate storefronts along the main streets of towns to give the appearance of a modern community. Walking through the doors, frontier settlers would enter tents or other modest structures. Appropriately, the storefronts were called facades. They looked modern, but they hid traditional living conditions.

This is the essence of administration in a prismatic society. Extensive facades and procedures exist, but they are not expected to work in practice. Things are not what they appear to be.**Riggs did not want to use Western words to describe practices in the prismatic society. To use Western terms would carry the implication that a particular system met the definition of its industrialized counterpart. A bureau in a transitional society would not operate in the same manner as a bureau in a modern state. Leaders of the transitional society might use that term to describe the facade they had adopted, but labels alone do not define a structure.

Riggs felt obliged to create a whole new vocabulary. To him, a bureau in a transitional society was not a bureaucracy. It was a sala, a Spanish word that means not only a formal office where business is conducted, but also a chamber in one's home where traditional functions are performed. The operation of the sala can only be understood in the context of an office in which both official and personal obligations are fulfilled, a notion quite contrary to one of the defining principles of Max Weber's bureaucratic theory. (The principle is that of impersonality.) The operation of the sala, in other words, can only be understood in terms of its ecology.

Students who read Riggs's works found that they had to master anew vocabulary every bit as complex as Swahili or Chinese. There were salas and clects, price indeterminancy and bazaar-canteens. Agglomeration and kaleidoscopic stratification characterized social classes, while poly-normativism affected decision making. The vocabulary forced students of the theory to think about administration from the perspective of people in the transitional society, not as outsiders trying to understand why everything seemed to go wrong.

Economic activities in a prismatic society might mimic the structure of markets, but they would not operate that way. Prices in a prismatic society would respond to the reciprocal power of the trading partners as well as to the more impersonal relationship between supply and demand. In bazaars, prices fluctuate as people strike bargains based on their status, negotiating skill, and ability to deceive. In a canteen, special privileges are reserved for a select group of military and civil officials.

Western-style interest groups would appear in prismatic societies, but they would behave like cliques and sects. Riggs combined the two words to form clects. In form, the groups

resemble Western associations like the AMA, but behave like traditional families or clans. Membership in a clect is restricted to people who share a common religious, racial, or linguistic background. The formal goals of the clect mask a wide diversity of traditional functions being performed within them.

Poly-normativism refers to a myth system that mixes mystical and rational approaches to problem solving. Property rights, for example, area form of privilege that must be legitimized through the symbols of contract and private ownership. In prismatic societies, persons from groups with high status may enjoy access to all sorts of privileges to which they have no legal rights. Likewise, the rights possessed by persons of low status are rarely protected by effective legal procedures. Leaders in a prismatic society will promulgate a legal rule and then allow a wide variety of variations in its enforcement. The ambiguous nature of rules is compounded by the extraordinary mixing of myths with rational standards, with officials borrowing rituals from their ancestors while imitating the legal processes set up by the colonial parent or outside advisers. Since there is little broad-scale agreement upon the basic norms of society and many groups remain unassimilated into the nation, it is terribly difficult to get everyone to abide by standard legal formulas. Control must be grabbed through coercion, violence, money, or charismatic rule, but rarely through constitutional procedures. For every phenomenon in this paragraph, Riggs invented a special term: status-contract nexus, double talk, dissensus, and poly-normativism.

Contributions

Riggs' prismatic theory first helped to kill the belief in universal principles of administration, a movement well underway by the time *The Ecology of Public Administration* appeared. The retreat from universal principles was at least ten years old, marked by works such as Dwight Waldo's 1948 edition of *The Administrative State*. Riggs' theory helped to finish off what was already a dying belief.

The influence of the theory went well beyond that. In the long-run, the prismatic model has led to at least two intellectual developments critical to an understanding of public administration. One concerns the uniqueness of the American system; the other the search for a theory of administrative relativity.

In spite of the death of universality, many practitioner-scholars continue to believe in the necessity of higher management forms for industrialized societies. From this perspective, industrialized economies require a particular system of administration based on an understanding of market forces and professional management. The U.S. economic system, in this regard, is often held up as a model for other industrialized countries to

follow, along with the systems of management that support it.

Applying his ecological theory back to the U.S., Riggs has suggested that the indigenous system of public bureaucracy to be found in the U.S. is a creature of unique cultural and historical factors. Much of this analysis can be found in Riggs' work on presidentialism. As Riggs likes to point out, some thirty countries have adopted the American presidential system of government, in which the head of government is elected for a fixed term, not subject to discharge by a simple no-confidence vote of the legislature. In all but the United States, the systems have suffered catastrophic breakdowns. "Either the president has taken draconian measures to handle a crises by suspending the constitution and dissolving congress; or the bureaucracy, led by a group of military officers, has seized power." Why, Riggs asks, has the U.S. bureaucracy remained so subservient? The answer lies in a peculiar set of cultural and historical factors that restrain bureaucratic power and allow the presidential system to operate in the U.S. but apparently nowhere else. By implication, public administration reforms arising from the American experience are likely to be so unique as to be nontransferable. On the basis of comparative analysis, moreover, we will see clearly that approaches and prescriptions which are needed in America are often quite inappropriate elsewhere -- in other words, an understanding of American Public Administrative by no means gives us a general knowledge of Public administration.

America lessons on public administration, from POSDCORB to reinventing government, are still taught to foreign nationals in U.S. educational programs, often from a perspective of "take what you like and leave the rest." Riggs' theory not only denies the notion of universal causality, it also suggests that American institutions are far more unique than anyone has previously imagined.

Riggs is often criticized for tearing down rather than building up. His models tend to explain why Western methods do not work without suggesting what does. It is worth remembering that Riggs' father did not merely explain the failure of Western agriculture. He also helped set up China's first Department of Agricultural Engineering at the University of Nanking, which developed technologies relevant to local conditions.

Administrative practices are very idiosyncratic. They are highly dependent upon the cultural norms and traditions of the society in which they are practiced, and are very sensitive to beliefs formed in the culture at large. The current U.S. fascination with contracting out, for example, has no basis in empirical literature, but receives a great deal of support from a popular culture where works of imagination like Huckleberry Finn and Ghostbusters encourage distrust of institutions. If reinventing government were a pill being manufactured by a pharmaceutical company, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration would not license it base on the evidence at hand.**Public administration as a field of study has pushed away from the search for universal methods, recognizing

that societies solve administrative problems in vastly different ways. The methods vary across both space and time. The ideal U.S. public administrator in the 1950s, someone like Robert Moses, would be incapable of governing in the team-based work force of the 1990s.

Some practitioner-scholars have attempted to avoid the idiosyncratic nature of methods by searching for cultural patterns behind the methods. The organization culture movement, as an example, emphasizes the creation of appropriate norms. This movement began with the notion of"one best culture," a perspective promoted in preachy tomes like In Search of Excellence. Sophisticated studies recognize that there are many effective cultures, just as many effective methods. A culture will be effective so long as it allows people in the organization to solve important problems.

This is where I believe the concept of administrative relativity leads. Practitioner-scholars proceeding from an ecological perspective look toward the capacity of organizations to solve essential problems. The list of problems has changed since the 1950s, when Talcott Parsons identified his common functions. The new list seems more practical. Look at the problem of motivation, for example. How effectively can a society motivate people in organizations to pursue collective activities? The problem of incentives is key. What sort of incentive systems does the society possess that encourage people to learn from their experience and make appropriate structural changes? The problem of transaction costs cuts across national boundaries. What procedures do governments adopt that reduce transaction costs and thereby promote collective action?

]Appropriate methods tend to mirror the larger society that practices them. The United States, for example, utilizes competition as an incentive for organizational self-improvement. Competition is part of the U.S. culture. Where competition works, people have an incentive to abandon inappropriate practices and adopt innovations. A good manager under such a system is likely to be someone who embodies the qualities of competition ^ a Vince Lombardi, for example. In a society where cooperation is favored over competition, different methods would arise. Different people would be pushed forward to lead. A competitive manager would not do well in a society favoring cooperative norms.

The admission of such widespread differences in public administration creates special challenges in an increasingly interdependent world. In seeking to coordinate the construction of the international Space Station, U.S. and Russian managers found that engineering problems were easier to solve than managerial differences. Learning to manage across cultural barriers will be of increasing importance as governments oversee multinational activities.

We would not have arrived at our current level of understanding without the contributions of Fred W. Riggs. My own research has taken me into technology and national space policy. Nothing, I assumed, could be further from Riggs' ecological theories than the exploration of space. A few weeks ago a book on the Chinese space program arrived on my desk. On page 21, the author explained that "the predictive powers of Riggs's provisional paradigm in this environment seem amazingly accurate." His influence is everywhere, even in outer space.