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WOODROW WILSON

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Introduction

The intellectual roots of 'Public Administration as a Discipline' are traced to the pioneering contributions made by Woodrow Wilson in the 1880's. Wilson, through his famous essay, 'The Study of Administration',¹ stimulated interest in and stressed the need for a scientific study of administration. His essay was epochal in delineating the conduct of government as a field for analytical study and generalisation,² and the beginning of public administration as a subject of enquiry. Woodrow Wilson provided the rationale for public administration to be an academic discipline and professional speciality.³ Though Wilson asserted that the aim of his work was to produce a 'semi-popular introduction to administrative studies', the essay is regarded as the beginning of public administration as a specified study.⁴ A significant feature of Wilson's contribution was that he wrote the essay when he had no personal experience of American administration and his article was regarded as a 'significant trail-blazing effort'. Wilson did not follow his early success in this field either with teaching or research though his later works contained elements of his administrative thought.⁵



(1856-1924)

Life and Works

Thomas Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924) was born in Stanton, Virginia, USA, and studied politics, government and law. He went to Davidson College for a year in 1873 and later transferred to Princeton from where he graduated in 1879. After graduation, he joined the law school of the University of Virginia for a brief period and later studied on his own and passed

the Georgia Bar examination. Wilson started practicing law in 1882 in Atlanta. But after a year he joined Johns Hopkins University from where he obtained a Ph.D in 1886 in history and political science. An interesting feature of his academic career is that he published his first book *Congressional Government* in his twenty-eighth year when he was in his second year of graduation at Johns Hopkins University. This book was quite independent of his studies and was used only *ex post facto* for purposes of Ph.D.⁶ The dissertation brought him fame and also teaching appointment at Bryn Mawr College for Women (1885-88). He later worked at Wesleyan University (1888-90). In 1890 he joined Princeton University as Professor of Jurisprudence and Political Economy and continued there for over a decade until 1902. He was President of Princeton University between 1902-1910 and his tenure saw sweeping reforms in curriculum and administration. He revolutionised teaching, established new faculties, and played a significant role in the development of the university as a great university in the twentieth century.⁷ He was elected President of the American Political Science Association in 1911. Wilson was Governor of New Jersey (1911-1913) and President of USA (1913-1921). He wrote eight books⁸ and published several papers. Wilson was a recipient of the Noble Peace Prize in 1919 for his peace efforts and contribution to the formation of League of Nations.

Wilson was an outstanding professor of political science, an administrative scholar, a historian, an educationist, a reformer and a statesman. Having been deeply influenced by contemporary events, he felt that the study of administration was a possible method for correcting the political abuses of the spoils system that were so apparent in those days. While Edmund Burke was more influential than any other person in shaping Wilson's political philosophy, Walter Bagehot turned his attention to administration and comparative government.⁹ It was Professor Richard T. Ely of Johns Hopkins University, however, who influenced and stimulated Wilson's interest in administrative studies. His lectures were most significant to Wilson as they stimulated him to think about assimilation of European administrative systems into American democratic polity. As Ely wrote, "When I talked of the importance of administration, I felt that I struck a spark and kindled a fire in Wilson."¹⁰

The Study - Three Drafts

Wilson started serious work on comparative systems of administration soon after he started teaching at Bryn Mawr in 1885. Before his seminal essay was published in the *Political Science Quarterly* in 1887, Wilson prepared *three drafts* of the same topic. The first was entitled 'Notes on Administration'; it was changed to 'The Art of Government' and finally gave the title 'The Study of Administration'.¹¹ A look at these three drafts would clearly indicate that there was considerable change in Wilson's ideas from draft to draft. The paper, before it was published, was presented before the Historical and Political Science Association in Ithaca, New York at the invitation of its President, Charles K. Adams of Cornell University and a former teacher of Wilson. Although Wilson thought so light of it, as hardly to merit publication, it was considered one of the best he ever wrote. According to one authority, it immediately became famous among specialists on administration and has always been a mine of wisdom.¹² In his article, Wilson outlined the history of the study, how it was a comparatively new development in political science, very cogently presented the necessity and value of the study and indicated the methods by means of which it ought to be carried on.

Administration and Government

Wilson begins his essay by introducing the reader to the general field of administration. The study of administration developed, according to Wilson, as a consequence to the increasing

complexities of society, growing functions of state and growth of governments on democratic lines. This ever-growing array of functions raised the question as to 'how' and in what 'directions' these functions should be performed. Wilson suggested that there was a need to reform the government and the reforms should be in the administrative field. To Wilson, the object of administrative study is to discover what government can properly and successfully do and how it can do these things with the utmost possible efficiency and the least possible cost either of money or of energy.¹³ Another object is to rescue executive methods from confusion and costliness of empirical experiment and place them upon foundations, laid deep on stable principles.¹⁴

Wilson considered administration as the most obvious part of government and felt that it is government in action; it is the executive, the operative, the most visible side of the government.¹⁵ But this 'government in action', did not provoke the students of politics, and therefore, no one wrote systematically about administration as an important branch of the science of government. Before the nineteenth century, political scientists were busy writing about the constitution, nature of state, essence and seat of sovereignty, popular power and king's prerogative and the purpose of government, etc. They were mostly concerned with the problems of democracy and monarchy. The question always was 'who' should make laws and what that law should be, and the question 'how' the law should be administered with equity, speed and without friction was put aside as practical detail which 'clerks' could look after.¹⁶

Wilson analysed the reasons for the neglect of the study of administration. Before the nineteenth century populations were small, and therefore, the functions of government and their administration were very simple. But by the 19th century, complexities of trade and commerce, emergence of giant corporations, problems of personnel management, etc., assumed ominous proportions and the once simple functions of government had, almost in all cases, become more complex, difficult and multiplying. The very idea of state and the consequent ideal of its duty had undergone phenomenal change. The problem, therefore, was 'how' these functions should be performed by the state.

Administrative Science

Wilson strongly believed that administration is eminently a science. This is clear when he said that the science of administration is the latest fruit of the study of the science of politics. Later in his essay he says that we are having now, what we never had before, a science of administration.¹⁷ Wilson was critical that not much scientific method was to be discerned in American administrative practice. As a matter of fact, he felt, there were no clear concepts of what constitutes good administration. This was so because administrative science was first developed in Europe by French and German academics. Consequently, administration developed to meet the requirements of compact states and centralised forms of European government. The reasons for the growth of administration on European soil, according to Wilson, are two-fold: first, as governments in European countries were independent of popular assent, there was more government; and second, the desire to keep government a monopoly made the monopolists interested in discovering the least irritating means of governing. If one wants to use the concepts of European administrative science in other countries including America, one has to radically change its aims, thoughts and principles, Wilson argued.

The slow progress in the science of administration in America was attributed to the popular sovereignty. Wilson felt that it was difficult to organise administration in a democracy than in a monarchy. For, administration has to be continuously responsive to the 'multitudinous monarch called public opinion'. Wherever public opinion is a governing

principle of government, administrative reforms will always be slow because of compromises. Wilson strongly believed that unless a nation stops tinkering with the constitution, it will be very difficult to concentrate on administration. This is because no constitution can last more than ten years without changes, and therefore, the governments would always be busy with these changes and alterations, leaving little time to concentrate on details of administration. Therefore, Wilson wanted that the debate on the constitutional principles should be set aside as they are of little practical consequence, and one should try to systematically analyse and understand the 'science of administration'. Wilson aptly observed that it is more difficult to run a constitution than to frame one. He was concerned with the implementation aspects and not just the principles enunciated in the constitution or other documents.

After discussing in detail the history of the study of administration and the difficulties in its study, Wilson discusses its subject matter and characteristics. To Wilson, public administration is a detailed and systematic execution of public law. Every particular application of a general law is an act of administration. Illustrating the point, he says that the broad plans of governmental action are not administrative though the detailed execution of such plans is. The distinction is between general plans and administrative means.¹⁸ The study of administration, viewed philosophically, writes Wilson, is closely connected with the study of the proper distribution of constitutional authority.

Politics and Administration

Wilson examines the relationship between administration and politics. His views on the subject, however, do not appear to be very clear because at some places he explains the interdependence and intimate relationship between the two. This is clear when he says that "no lines of demarcation, setting apart administrative from non-administrative functions, can be run between this and that department of government without being run uphill and down dale over dizzy heights of distinction and through dense jungles of statutory enactment, hither and thither around 'ifs' and 'buts', 'whens' and 'howevers', until they become altogether lost to the common eye."¹⁹ Later in 1891, Wilson wrote that "no topic in the study of government can stand by itself-least of all perhaps administration whose part it is to mirror the principles of government in operation.... Administration cannot be divorced from its connections with the other branches of Public Law without being distorted and robbed of its true significance. Its foundations are those deep and permanent principles of politics."²⁰ From these statements, it is evident that Wilson was aware of the interdependence between politics and administration, while trying to carve out the field of public administration.

Wilson argues, at other places, that administration and politics are separate. He felt that administration lies outside the sphere of politics. Administrative questions are not political questions.²¹ He further says that politics is the special province of the statesman and administration that of the technical official. Later in his essay he says that "bureaucracy can exist only where the whole service of the state is removed from the common political life of the people, its chiefs as well as its rank and file. Its motives, its objectives, its policy, its standards must be bureaucratic."²² Thus, Wilson tries to establish a distinction between administration and politics.

From the foregoing, it appears that Wilson vacillated between separability and inseparability of administration and politics. This made the later scholars to speculate differently about his ideas and intentions on the subject. For instance, Mosher stressed that Wilson made the most vigorous statement on the politics-administration dichotomy.²³ Riggs, on the other hand, thought differently. He says that for Wilson not only politics and

administration are closely intertwined, but administrative actions are scarcely conceivable except as the implementation of general policies formulated by political means. Thus Wilson was under no illusion that administrative development could take place in a political vacuum.²⁴ Wilson attempted to outline a coherent idea about politics and public administration and how each should be separate, and yet work together. His idea was to improve efficiency of government operations by developing an administrative system free from political interference.

Administration and Business

There are also writers who argue that to Wilson 'the field of administration is a field of business' and 'is removed from the hurry and strife of politics.' 'Administration is business and like business it does not involve itself in questions of politics...administration being removed from politics is not subject to the vagaries and vicissitudes but it goes on uninterrupted continuing the promise of the system.'²⁵ Buechner argues that the "basic premise of Wilson's argument was that the affairs of public administration were synonymous with those of private administration." To him, the importance of Wilson's essay lies in his argument that the study of public administration should be akin to the central concerns of business administration, namely the values of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.²⁶

Administration and Public Opinion

The relations between public opinion and administration were also examined by Wilson. The question was what part public opinion should take in the conduct of administration. To this Wilson says that public opinion takes the place of an authoritative critic. But "the problem is to make public opinion efficient without suffering it to be meddlesome." Though public criticism in the details of administration is a clumsy nuisance, as a mechanism of superintending policy it is not only beneficial but also altogether indispensable. Therefore, Wilson felt that the administrative study should find the best means for giving public criticism this control and at the same time should shut it from all interference in administration.

The Civil Service

The indispensability of a technically schooled civil service was strongly advocated by Wilson. A civil service based on merit was necessary to organise democracy. Although, Wilson believed that administrators were in principle not involved in the political process, he was strongly opposed to the creation of bureaucratic elite not subject to democratic control.²⁷ He felt that the civil service reform, which was then in progress in America, was only a prelude to a fuller administrative reform; "a moral preparation for what is to follow" These reforms, which were intended to make the service unpartisan, opened the way for making administration businesslike. The reforms in the methods of appointment and actions. He wanted the civil service to be "cultured and self-sufficient enough to act with sense and vigour, and yet so intimately connected with the popular thought, by means of elections and constant public counsel, as to find arbitrariness or class spirit out of the question."²⁸ Thus Wilson, as Nicholas Henry observed, facilitated the expansion of an ethical sense of public duty beyond the conceptual confines of the civil service and into the entire intellectual terrain of public administration.²⁹

Comparative Method

Wilson, in the final section of the article, examined the methods best suited for the study of administration. He rejected the philosophical method and emphasised the historical and comparative methods. He says that nowhere else in the whole field of politics, can one use these methods more safely than in the province of administration.³⁰ Without comparative studies in government, Wilson asserted, we cannot rid ourselves of the misconception that administration stands on a different basis in democratic and other states. One can never learn the weaknesses or virtues or peculiarities of any system without comparing it with other systems. Allaying the fears that comparative method may lead to the import of foreign systems, he says; 'If I see a murderous fellow sharpening the knife cleverly, I can borrow his ways of sharpening knife without borrowing his probable intention to commit murder with it.'³¹ Wilson felt that one can learn from European autocracies, their more efficient administrative methods without importing their autocratic spirit and ends; 'indeed that we must do so if democracy is to be able to meet the challenge of chaos from within and of force from without'.³²

There are divergent interpretations of Wilson's thinking on the important aspect of export of administrative technology from one country to another. Riggs, for example, believes that "Wilson gave his highest loyalty to democratic government and he would never have approved export of administrative technology to non-democratic countries. He would have recommended first to concentrate on political development, in the sense of promoting democratic reforms as a prelude to administrative reorganisation." Thus Riggs felt that "Wilson was quite aware of the political context of administrative reform and of development administration."³³ But Heady thinks differently. He observes that Wilson's "essay seem to assume that there is no restriction on the availability of administrative technology for export, and his attention is given exclusively to the question of the circumstances under which it should be imported."³⁴

The Government – New Meaning

Wilson, we have noted earlier, did not pursue his academic interest in public administration beyond "The Study". The publication of article "The New Meaning of Government"³⁵ a quarter century later in 1912 in a women's magazine in the month when he was elected as president of US, however, can be considered as a significant publication in which he again reflected on governance and administration. In this very short article, he reinforces some of the ideas and conceptions articulated in "The Study" and takes some of them further as he prepares to take the reins of administration and governance of the USA. An important aspect is that he focuses more on implementation aspects of administration. In "The Study" he talks of the 'consent of the governed' but in "The New Meaning of Government" he extends the consent to the 'participation in government of all classes and interests' and disentanglement of the government from all vested interests and 'free from every kind of private and narrow control' to become responsive to genuine public opinion and develop 'the vision of the nation'.³⁶ He reinforces the earlier argument that the government should be thoroughly 'efficient as a successful business organisation would be'.³⁷ He argues that 'the law(s) should be clear, explicit, founded upon fact, unmistakable in its command and in its penalties' and should be changed if they are bad. He emphasises on the implementation of the laws thoroughly, intelligently, fearlessly and without reference to 'persons or interests - financial or political.'³⁸ Wilson argues that the government must administer resources as a 'good trustee' and as an instrument of humanity for social betterment and identifies the priority functions as food security, conservation of natural resources including rivers and forests, maintenance of health and sanitation, development of

agriculture, industries, education, women and cities and he calls this 'the new meaning of government'.

An Evaluation

The publication of Woodrow Wilson's famous essay marks the birth of public administration as a self-conscious inquiry.³⁹ Through this essay, Wilson sought to aid the establishment of public administration as a recognised field of study.⁴⁰ Doctrine after doctrine, which public administration has accepted as valid, was first clearly enunciated by Wilson in his essay.⁴¹ The reader, after a study of Wilson's "The Study of Administration," however, remains uncertain about its actual substance. Wilson likens administration to business methods, instituting a civil service, fixing responsible to public for action or a problem of distributing constitutional authority, which is indeed exasperating to any careful reader.⁴² Wilson observes that the object of administrative study is to discover what government can properly and successfully do in the very opening paragraph of the essay. But the essay is devoted largely to the argument on the separability of politics and administration, which according to Waldo, is a serious inconsistency.⁴³ This led the later scholars to interpret Wilson's views in differing ways.

"The Study of Administration", as Wilson himself noted, is too general, too broad and too vague.⁴⁴ Wilson was ambivalent on many issues and he raised more questions than providing answers. He failed to amplify what the study of administration actually entailed; what the proper relationship should be between administrative and political realms and whether or not administrative study could ever become a science akin to the natural sciences.⁴⁵ This makes one to wonder whether Wilson himself was clear as to what Public Administration really is. Some researchers, however, question the assumption that Wilson was the founder of the academic study of Public Administration. Van Riper, in particular, ascribes the initial version of American administrative study to the Founding Fathers of America and relieves Wilson and his essay of any responsibility.⁴⁶

These limitations, however, do not undermine the significance of Wilson's contribution. Judged from the standpoint of the development of Public Administration in the 19th century, his essay can certainly be termed 'seminal'. As Waldo noted his essay is "the most important document in the development of public administration."⁴⁷ Louis Brownlow observed that Wilson through his essay 'laid down as a programme of study which I think everyone in the society, every one of us who is interested in either the art or science of public administration, would do well to read again and to heed.'⁴⁸ Through his 'most distinguished' essay, Wilson not only introduced the 'idea of administration',⁴⁹ but also launched Public Administration as a generic course.⁵⁰

In Brief

Woodrow Wilson's contribution to the field of public administration may be summarised as:

- Wilson laid the intellectual roots for the emergence of public administration as a field/subject of enquiry through his essay "The Study of Administration" in 1887;
- "The Study of Administration" traced the history of administration as a new development in Political Science, presented the value of the study and indicated the methods by means of which it ought to be carried;
- "The Study of Administration" was the result of Wilson's search to find answers to the political abuses of the spoil system and finding ways of assimilation of European administrative systems into American democratic politics;

- He emphasised the importance of study of administration in the context of increasing complexity in society, increasing role of state and democratic nature of governments;
- Wilson considered administration eminently a science and pleaded for the development of clear concepts of good administration;
- He examined the relationship between politics and administration and considered them as separate activities at one level and interdependent at another. This vagueness led to different interpretations of his views on politics and administration relationships;
- He focused on the implementation aspects of government and advocated the need for technically competent civil service based on merit;
- Wilson emphasised the importance of comparative method, particularly learning from others about the ways of doing things without learning their motives and ends; and
- "The Study of Administration" was too general, too broad and too vague, as Wilson himself put it. It gave scope for different interpretations of Wilson's views and also assessment of his contribution to the study of public administration. Looking in a historical context when the political debate was mainly on "who" should make laws and "what" the laws should be, his focus on "how" laws should be 'administered' is a seminal contribution.

References

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- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*
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- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.
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