

*Edoardo Ongaro, Giovanni Orsina &
Lorenzo Castellani (eds.): The Humanities
and Public Administration: An Introduction*

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The book “The Humanities and Public Administration: An Introduction”, published by Edward Elgar in 2025, is an interdisciplinary compendium of various works that links public administration with different fields within humanities. It is edited by three distinguished scholars, one from the field of public administration, namely Edoardo Ongaro (Professor of Public Management, The Open University, UK), and two experts in political history, Giovanni Orsina (Professor of Contemporary History, LUISS School of Government, Italy), and Lorenzo Castellani (Professor of History of Political Institutions and Lecturer, LUISS School of Government, Italy). Besides the editors, sixteen other scholars from a wide range of academic disciplines (moral philosophy, public governance, art history, political theory, etc.) contributed to the book. This book can be considered the third part of what might be called Ongaro’s trilogy of interdisciplinary introductions to public administration, following his works “Philosophy and Public Administration: An Introduction”, and “Religion and Public Administration: An introduction”, both of which have also been reviewed in this journal (Koprić, 2020; Kožina, 2024).

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In addition to the introducing chapter, there are seventeen more papers in the volume. To make this review more fluent and comprehensive, works will be divided into four groups (or as Ongaro stated – clusters), depending on the specific discipline within humanities they are tackling – philosophy, religion, history, and the arts.

The volume opens with the paper titled “The Contribution of the Humanities to the Advancement of Public Governance and Public Administration” written by the editors, in which they introduce this complex and multi-layered topic to the reader; explaining how humanities and social sciences complement each other. It appears that editors are striving to return to the scientific roots, by bringing the humanities back into the study of Public Administration (PA), or, as they put it, by attempting to “(re) integrate” them. The editors argue that this can be useful for answering the question of what it is that we, as human beings, can really know (p. 7). The introduction is followed by a group of philosophical papers.

The first paper examines the contemporary relevance of Dwight Waldo’s work. In this paper, Patrick Overeem once again reminds us of the significant role Waldo played in the evolution of PA as an administrative science, even comparing Waldo’s work to that of Socrates. Overeem raises two important questions: should PA follow the model of STEM sciences, or be closer to the humanities; and if the latter is more appropriate, what kinds of the humanities should PA draw upon?

Another work in this section is one on public philosophy and the administrative state, written by Christopher Ansell. The author provides us perspectives of three public philosophies of the administrative state: populism, liberalism, and civic republicanism. Additionally, administrative lawyers will find the section on administrative discretion in a democracy particularly interesting.¹

The discussion on pragmatism and PA comes from Travis A. Whetsell, who highlights four principles of this philosophical school (the “4 Ps”: practical, pluralistic, participatory, and provisional). Moreover, he provides a brief overview of the influence of pragmatism on PA classics (e.g., H. Simon), as well as on contemporary scholars (e.g., J. Dewey). The ethics perspective on PA is presented in the fifth chapter by Stefano Biancu and Edoardo Ongaro, who focus on the concept of supererogation. They

¹ Regarding administrative discretion, I would like to point out – especially for the foreign readers – seminal work on this matter written by Croatian jurist and professor of administrative law – Ivo Krbek. See: Krbek, I. 1937.

explain that supererogatory actions are morally positive actions that go beyond the duty; beyond what is required to be done. Revisiting Mark Moor's famous theory of public value, they link supererogation to the administrative doctrine of collaborative governance, positioning it in contrast to New Public Management. The second to last philosophical contribution in this cluster comes from Jonathan Kamkhaj and Claudio Radaelli. In their work, authors seek to answer what major models of individuals have historically emerged in administrative sciences regarding the public manager's role. In addressing this question, they trace an ontological path from the *homo oeconomicus* and *homo discentis*, to the *homo emotionalis* and *homo faber*. At the end, Irene Hardaill introduces us to human geography, and the study of governance from the UK perspective, emphasizing the nexus between human geography and public policy, and the connection between social sciences and humanities.

A group of works that connect history and PA begin with the discussion on the concept of the state through the lens of historiography. Leonida Tedoldi demonstrates how the understanding of the question – *What the state is?* – has changed over time, analysing the writing of prominent authors from various countries such as S. Romano, H. Kelsen, S. Hoffmann, and many others. The story of five episodes on the topic of PA and historiography is presented by Fabio Rugge, whose storytelling is truly admirable. The main characters of these episodes are D. Waldo (emphasizing the importance of the past for general teachings and problem-solving techniques), G. R. Elton (highlighting the Tudor dilemma concerning the optimal size of a council, which remains relevant even to this day in discussions on the structure of an organization), G. Miglio (who advocates the autonomy of the history of administration), A. Molitor (associated with the establishment of IIAS and the “decision” on the plurality of administrative sciences), and E. W. Heyen (who considers administrative history more open to disciplinary dialogue than to defensive boundaries). In the final chapter contributed by historians, Lorenzo Castellani demonstrates how history can be useful for public administration, explaining how a historian's toolkit, such as periodization, contextualization, analogy, and integration of evidence, can be helpful in PA research.

The following chapters explore the role of religion in the context of public governance. The first one is written by Michele Tantardini and Edoardo Ongaro, on the contribution of religious studies and theological literature to PA. They have reviewed 58 articles from the period between 1960 and

2023 and attributed them to one of the 18 topics they had previously identified. Their research shows that religious studies and theological literature have focused their attention on studying the numerous relations between religion and PA at the level of the behaviour of individuals; however, they note an insufficient examination of Asian religions. Pasquale Annicchino writes about how secularization theory is an optical illusion. He concludes that, contrary to previous scholars' expectations, religion appears to play a more significant role than ever. The interaction between religion and public administration is multifaceted: it can be perceived either as a problem or as a part of the solution, while a deeper understanding of its role can improve public policies for the common good. With a slightly different view on secularity, yet in the same manner, Ronald van Steden argues that religious wisdom may help identify promising routes to reconnecting government with society.

The final chapters comprise as many as five papers predominantly focused on the association between the arts and PA. In the first of them, Edoardo Ongaro claims that arts can contribute to the study and practice of PA; moreover, they can provide deeper and broader perspectives and approaches to better understanding of public administration. In addition, Gjalte de Graaf and Hanneke van Asperen discuss how art itself can be a source of knowledge and ideas in PA, arguing their thesis primarily on the example of Lorenzetti's frescoes "The Allegory of Good and Bad Government". Lorenzetti's artefacts are the topic of the next chapter as well, written by Wolfgang Drechsler. He concludes that the importance of visual art, "because of its power to transcend hermeneutical problems and confront the views directly and immediately, becomes apparent – and with it, the importance of the humanities approach generally" (p. 251). In chapter 17, Geert Bouckaert analytically elaborates on the connection between the humanities and social sciences using the 3C classification: co-operations, constellations, and co-productions. His research shows that artistic research relies far more on scientific research than *vice versa*.

In the final chapter of the volume, Stefano Biancu and Edoardo Ongaro link humanism to PA. They distinguish between three meanings of the term "humanism" – historical, cultural and axiological – and conclude, in Julia Kristeva's "dare to dare" manner, that humanism ought to infuse PA and that PA should be perceived as practical humanism.

Even though all the works of the volume are divided into four groups in this brief overview, it should be noted that this is only for the didactic purpose. Many authors in their papers use perspectives and elements

of several disciplines within humanities. For instance, when Ongaro or Drechsler argue on PA and arts, they also use philosophical insights; the same is true for how Rugge discusses historiography and PA.

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The idea of connecting administrative sciences with other disciplines and employing their concepts to explain phenomena in public administration is not new. No student of PA can forget the explanation of open systems via entropy and the second law of thermodynamics (Katz & Kahn, 1966, p. 19). However, the connection of PA and the humanities lies at the very roots of PA. Before the intensive differentiation of scientific disciplines, which is still an ongoing process, the humanities and social sciences were integrated. Even the ancient Greek philosophers debated on the concept of the state and its administration, not only from, what we would today call the PA perspective, but even more from the standpoint of ethics and broader philosophy. For instance, Aristotle discusses PA in his work on ethics. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, he precisely states: “But it might be held to belong to the most authoritative and most architectonic one, and such appears to be the political art” (Aristotle, 2011, p. 2). This is why Ongaro’s call for the (re-)integration should be welcomed.

The endeavour of the editors and authors is worthy of praise, primarily because it reminds researchers – or shows to some of us – that it is not possible to fully understand an issue in science, looking at it from one narrow perspective. With such approach, it is almost impossible to discover crucial findings in disciplines whose main objects of study are human interactions and human artefacts, such as the state and its administration, or even the law.² Objects, and that includes objects of scientific inquiry as well, do not possess one ultimate inherent purpose, value or meaning. Or, if they do, it is not possible to reveal those characteristics. We can only (try to) understand the purpose, value or meaning that people ascribe to a particular object. This conclusion has been well-known since Immanuel Kant’s Copernican revolution in philosophy (*Ding an sich*). Hence, to fully understand different meanings and purposes of objects of scientific research, one must draw on a combination of multiple views and methods. Nevertheless, this does not mean that a scientist who combines various

² For more information on the law as a human artefact, see Burazin, Himma & Roversi, 2018.

disciplines and perspectives in their research will find a definite answer; however, such an approach will certainly bring them closer to the truth.

Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary endeavour is demanding, as it requires of scientist to possess a wide range of knowledge. Moreover, it can be difficult – and some authors say the most difficult thing – to admit that we have not read a seminal, or an otherwise important book (Čaćinović, 2009, p. 7; Bayard, 2010). Yet, no one is a superhero, and proficient in every field of human knowledge. This may lead us to the conclusion that we can never know anything. On the contrary, here we need to return to the beginning of this book, and to Socrates, reminding ourselves that knowing that we know nothing is the beginning of all knowledge, and a call for new explorations. That is why I strongly recommend reading “The Humanities and Public Administration: An Introduction”.

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