What is a Neo-Weberian State?
Reflections on a Concept and its Implications
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Introduction

My point of departure is the Pollitt and Bouckaert version of the Neo-Weberian State—from the 2004 edition of *Public Management Reform*. I note that the term “neo-Weberian” has a variety of uses, definitions and applications in the literatures of political science, sociology, and public affairs going back to the 1960s and 1970s, a point to which I will return.

According to Pollitt and Bouckaert, “there are continuing broad differences between different groups of countries” (2004, 102). These groups are the “maintainers”, the “modernizers”, and the “marketizers”. But, as I understand them, there are really only two groups of great interest in the context of reform: the core, Anglo-American NPM marketizers and the continental European modernizers. The reform model of this latter group is what Pollitt and Bouckaert classify as the Neo-Weberian State.

Applying the Pollitt and Bouckaert criteria, American governance may be “neo”—there have been developments in the American administrative state in recent decades that are to some degree “new and different”—but in no meaningful sense is American governance Weberian. If the American state is “neo”, though, what does that term modify; neo-what? I will suggest an answer to this question momentarily as well as argue for its relevance to a trans-European dialogue. But I will first address a broader question: Of what value is a dialogue on “the New-Weberian State”? That is, what intellectual and practical agendas might be advanced by such a dialogue? That basic question encompasses several more specific questions, which I take up in turn.

Why Classify?

The term “Neo-Weberian State” is, in the first instance, broadly descriptive (as was the classification New Public Management at its unveiling). But what is the ultimate purpose served by such classifications? On what sorts of analytic or theoretical foundations do such classifications rest? Do such classifications signify anything of deeper theoretical or normative significance? Do the descriptors qualify as dependent variables in a model that has observable, verifiable causes?

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1 In another forum, Pollitt has asked a similar question: “how and how far one can generalize in public management” (2006, 306-07).
Often, as in this case, a classification suggests that something new has emerged or is emerging. The profession of public administration has long been eager to announce what is new, emerging, and transformative, often without any compelling evidence (Lynn 2007). Using generalizations to depict “the new” can be illuminating: American pronouncements concerning “the new administration” and “the new management” in the first half of the twentieth century increased academic and practical attention directed toward an emerging phenomenon, the administrative state, which was genuinely new in America. But such generalizations can just as well sew confusion; the New Public Management rather quickly became both a shapeless catch-all term and an ideology of reform that, while in sharp decline, arguably lives on in the “neo” part of “Neo-Weberian State”. A similar metamorphosis may already be affecting the NWS; Wolfgang Drechsler proposes that this classification, too, be viewed as a normative model: “An administrative system generally works better, of course depending on time and place, the closer it is to the NWS” (2005).

**Paths Not Taken?**

A related question concerns the juxtaposition of such generalizations with the widely-accepted notion of path dependence in the evolution of national governing institutions. Don Kettl poses this question succinctly: “If, as is surely the case, reform is culturally dependent, how do variations in national culture affect the big reform trends?”

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2 Dunn and Miller, for example, put forward the convoluted characterization of “New Public Management (NPM) as “a program for governmental transformation initiated in the 1990s and captured by the concept “reinventing government” (2007, 345). The two constructs, New Public Management and Reinventing Government, arose contemporaneously on opposite sides of the Atlantic and were quite distinct from each other.

3 As Douglass North, the economist and theorist of the evolution of institutions, puts it (1990, 98), “[a]t every step along the way there [are] choices – political and economic – that [provide] real alternatives. Path dependence is a way to narrow conceptually the choice set and link decision making through time.” Relations among political choices over time can, for example, be formally expressed as a hierarchical structural model that incorporates a complex lag structure, a structure which might even be recursive. By recursive is meant that choices are characterized by processes which can be indefinitely and repeatedly applied to their own output, such as algorithms which create branching and subdivision. Specifically, contemporary public management might be viewed as a stage in a stochastic process whose asymptotic distribution (that is, the structures, practices, and institutionalized values that we can observe) evolves as a consequence of the history of that process, that is, it is non-ergodic, or path dependent. In short, a path-dependent process or time series is one whose asymptotic distribution – the outcomes toward which it is tending – evolves as a consequence of the history of the process.
Kettl continues: “Modernising Government [the OECD publication on which he was commenting on], like much cutting-edge work in government reform, struggles to deal with the inescapable dilemma: the search for central, driving themes, on the one hand, and the need to recognize the vast variation among nations, on the other” (Kettl 2006, 315).

Path dependence seems to be in tension with broad generalizations concerning administrative state characteristics and trajectories, which are often ahistorical and almost always seem to be at least lightly flavored with the notion of “progress” if not of isomorphic convergence.

Two specific questions obtrude at this point: (1) Is variance among the administrative systems of the states classified as “neo-Weberian” being reduced—is that implied by the classification—and, if so, does this isomorphic convergence suggest that these states are deviating from historical paths of national institutional development? (2) If convergence is not implicit in the neo-Weberian classification, then what purpose is served by the classification? It might it be the case that the rapid succession of normative models, including NPM, the NWS, and, a competitor also enjoying some popularity, the New Governance, succeed each other in quick order because tensions between these models and underlying path dependence of legal state evolution are generally resolved in favor of the weight of history.

It seems difficult to avoid such theoretical issues that are at least implicitly raised by the notion of a New-Weberian State.

What Does It Mean to be “Neo-Weberian”?  

If, for the sake of argument, a reduction in variance among a selected set of administrative system characteristics in neo-Weberian states is the phenomenon to be explained, are there theories that might account for such a development? To take a normative perspective, if such a reduction in variance, a convergence on the NWS, is proposed as the objective of public management reform, are there theories to frame or inform the design of reform strategies?

Neo-Weberian Theories of Organizations and States

The term “neo-Weberian” has been used in the literatures of political science, sociology, and public administration since at least 1970. Often it is used without definition and refers to analysis that features variants of the Weberian model and

4 “[R]ecently . . . there has been a neo-Weberian revival in Anglo-American organization theory. This body of work, in fact, is probably sociology’s richest mine of predictive generalizations. Instead of reifying Weber’s ideal type, writers . . . have followed Weber’s comparative historical method” (Brown 1978, 367).
employs Weber’s comparative methods of analysis. “Neo-Weberian” analysis often emphasizes the “machinery of government” or power relationships in administrative systems or instrumental rationality. Neo-Weberian administration has also been viewed pejoratively, as a threat to liberal democracy.

The term “neo-Weberian” has often been used, not surprisingly, in the study of organizations. Sociologist Philip Selznick’s work on organizations, for example, has been termed “neo-Weberian” in the sense that, with Weberian assumptions as a point of departure, he introduces “the dark side of organizations”, that is, they “could be subverted by informal and illegitimate patterns of authority and decision making”, undermining their legitimacy (Hinings and Greenwood 2002, 412). In this view, according to Charles Fombrun (1986, 404) “actors manipulate systems to perpetuate their ability to achieve parochial ends, and individual action translates into forms of corporate governance that ultimately promote the emergence of distinct social classes.”

Of more immediate relevance to this forum is the use of the term “neo-Weberian State” in associated with theories of the state, especially those that are “state-centered”.5 Michael Mann’s well-known neo-Weberian definition of the state is a territorially demarcated, differentiated set of institutions and personnel with a center that exercises authoritative rulemaking backed by the coercive powers of the state (Mann 1983). Eric Nordlinger sees the state as reflecting the subjective preferences of policy makers who possess at least some significant degree of autonomy but are constrained by the state’s structural characteristics (Nordlinger 1988, Mitchell 1991).6

Some neo-Weberian theories of the state are varieties of institutionalism, especially including historical institutionalism. Historical institutionalism may emulate Weber’s emphasis on legitimacy. Leonard Seabrooke argues, for example, that “a reinvigorated conception of legitimacy provides us with a substantive neo-Weberian ‘historicalist’ approach that provides a deeper understanding of how both norms and material interests shape the state” (Seabrooke 2002 Abstract). By legitimacy, a key element of Weber’s own thought, Seabrooke refers to a distinctively democratic element in policy making that counters the tendency of state-centered approaches toward functionalist explanations of the state, which are also labeled “neo-Weberian”.

5 State-centered theories of the state contrast with those that are “society-centered”, which include varieties of pluralism/elitism, Marxist/neo-Marxist explanations, and post-structural approaches. Arguably, the construct “governance”, insofar as it both describes and prescribes networked, consociational and conjoint relationships as the heart of public administration, has a society-centered sense to it.

6 Timothy Mitchell counters that “The state should be addressed as an effect of detailed processes of spatial organization, temporal arrangement, functional specification, and supervision and surveillance, which create the appearance of a world fundamentally divided into state and society. The essence of modern politics is not policies formed on one side of this division being applied to or shaped by the other, but the producing and reproducing of this line of difference” (1991, 95).
Thus the tradition of neo-Weberian analysis offers perspectives that range from a neutral emphasis on administrative systems to both positive and negative assessments of the Neo-Weberian State’s normative implications for state-society relations and the legitimacy of administrative arrangements.

**The State as Given**

Some critics of neo-Weberian approaches to the state argue that the state itself is not taken as a phenomenon needing explanation or having a cause (Schulman 2003). The state may be viewed as “a logical necessity that functions according to some omnipotent knowledge of the reproductive needs of capitalism.” (Schulman 2003, 84).

One possible approach to analysis of the Neo-Weberian State is that individual states are understood as remaining on their distinctive paths of institutional evolution—what we might call constitutional evolution or the evolution of “the legal state”—while at the same time exhibiting isomorphism in important administrative system characteristics.7 As has often been observed, there are important elements of faith, ideology, and fashion in public management reform, sustained not by theory but by instrumental logic. Contrary what some scholars argue, administrative transformations can occur without fundamentally altering the state-society boundary.

There, I suppose, the matter might be left: within the enduring framework of the Weberian legal state, or decoupled from it, convergent changes in administrative systems are taking place. The analytic task is to classify the key administrative transformations and explain how they can occur without transforming the enduring character of the national state itself. Indeed, this logic is implicit in the very term “Neo-Weberian State” as Pollitt and Bouckaert use it and in their desiderata for what is “Weberian” and what is “neo”.

Those desiderata are so general, however, as to provoke the question of whether “neo-Weberian” is or is not meant to challenge not only the concept of path dependence but, as well, those theories, of which there are many, that predict it.8 In other words, does the classification “Neo-Weberian” inevitably imply a competing theory of the state and, if so, what is it?

Aside from this question, the specific question remains as to why Neo-Weberian reforms are or should be assumed to further liberal democracy and, therefore, to be “progressive”. To reach that conclusion, it is necessary to consider and reject the arguments and evidence to the contrary that were mentioned earlier.

7 This seems to be the approach implicitly taken by Temmes (2006).

8 For a discussion of some of those theories, see Lynn (2006), 169-173.
The State as the Phenomenon to be Explained

The absence of an explanation for why states are evolving as they are—the absence of an attribution of the NWS to specific historical and institutional causes—seems ultimately unsatisfactory, however, without a convincing argument decoupling NWS reforms from the various forms the legal state takes in the NWS group of countries.

One might argue instead, as I suggested in *Public Management: Old and New*, that sea changes in administrative systems might have as their cause the triumph of more aggressive forms of global capitalism, of border-erasing technologies, and of competition-based, performance-oriented, tax-minimizing social allocation over more society-centered forms of social allocation. Global capitalism influences administrative elites toward the weakening of command and control bureaucracies and the elimination of distortions in prices and interference in capital and labor mobility. One would expect to see as a concomitant a considerable weakening of elite support for redistributive policies that interfere with capital accumulation and a redistribution of property rights and control of scarcity rents toward private entities.

As I interpret them, Pollitt and Bouckaert's Neo-Weberian State is state-centered (arguably, by definition). Although the "neo" elements refer to citizens' needs, an external orientation, and consultation, these seem to be the accomplishments of administrative elites and "governments" (in the European sense of that term). Implicit in the NWS classification is the influence of global capitalism on administrative elites, on the legal state itself, and, on the authority of the legal state vis-à-vis supra-national entities such as the European Union. This is not to argue that states and supra-state entities are necessarily benign or progressive, however. Critics of global capitalism argue that supra-national organizations and institutions are subverting liberal democratic principles of governance, but contrary views are equally popular.

But what of the "distinctly democratic elements", the society-centered side of neo-Weberianism, with which legitimacy is arguably associated?

The Neo-Madisonian (Neo-Pluralist) State

An alternative causal account of administrative system evolution postulates that resurgent democracy, not the globalization of capitalism, is the dominant influence. Democracy requires the rule of law, the legally-sanctioned regulation of markets, the preservation of equity, and competent bureaucracies subject to control by statute and by judicial institutions: the preservation of a balance between state and society that ensures the legitimacy of administrative arrangements.

The case for ascendant democracy is strong. Jurgen Habermas notes that "even in established democracies, the existing institutions of freedom are no longer above challenge, although here the populations seem to press for more democracy rather than
“less” (Habermas 1996, xlii). An OECD Ministerial Symposium on the Future of public Services (Allen 1996) produced yet another argument, pointing to pluralism, that organized interest groups, long a major factor in American politics, are multiplying in many countries, as longstanding benefit structures are threatened by the demand for public administrative and fiscal reform. In cases where such groups as the elderly or those with vested interests in public pensions become sufficiently mobilized, the opportunities for long-term reform may be severely constrained. This is especially true when a political leader or his challengers finds large political advantage in playing to such groups.

In general, opportunities for the public to confront the politician have vastly expanded because of new communication technologies, and these confrontations are shaping the transformation of states.

If it is the triumph of democracy that is the story of our time, then, if historical experience is any guide, we should expect to see the administrative state become an even stronger and indispensable adjunct to competitive nationalism but, as in the past, in highly differentiated forms. Fred Riggs characterizes the current period as “para-modernism,” that is, a necessary confronting of the negative consequences of modernization and of bureaucracy as its instrument (Riggs 1997). In other words, “the elective affinities of the future may be driven not by new technology but rather by political culture” (Ignatieff 2000, 36).

In its narrow, corporate-mimicking manifestations, the managerialism promoted by global capitalism is likely to be vulnerable to the forces of democracy in significant part because it has lacked democratic legitimacy. “Rarely if ever,” say Roger Wettenhall and Ian Thynne 2002, 7), “have governments consulted their electorates about whether to embark on privatization programs or adopt other elements of NPM-type reforms. Managerialism has generally appealed to political and commercial elites, and has been introduced by them as *faits accomplis* presented to mostly passive publics.” In the same vein, Carsten Greve and Peter Jesperson (1999, 147) argue that “the concepts of citizen, citizens rights and citizen participation are almost non-existent in NPM debates.” Public dissatisfaction with such reforms has in fact led to electoral reversals in a number of countries. The most recent reforms have shifted attention to improved citizen access and participation.

To an American listening in on European discussions, these kinds of speculations resonate. The American state is Madisonian, that is, concerned with perfecting institutions that control faction and power on behalf of a “public interest” or in obedience to the “public will”. Accountability is an institutionalized acceptance of the authority of the separation of powers in a Madisonian sense (Bertelli and Lynn 2006). The American administrative state is, therefore, a creature of politics and subordinate to representative and judicial institutions. Social resource allocation is more society-
centered that state-centered, governed by a Madisonian, or pluralist, interplay of faction and power ensured by our separation of powers and our elaborate array of checks and balances. Indeed, state-centered theories of the state are less popular in America because of doubts that state actors are incapable of acting in a coherent and sustained way on behalf of any policy goal (Ellis 1992).

Thus the public management reforms of recent decades in the United States, from the presidencies of Jimmy Carter through Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush might plausibly be characterized as having further strengthened the state-centered—we would say Hamiltonian—elements of a Madisonian state, thereby reconfirming us as what might be characterized as a neo-Madisonian or, more generally, neo-pluralist state.

Why introduce this idea into a Trans-European Dialogue on the Neo-Weberian State? The reason is that consideration of the extent to which pluralist and societal influences are competing with capital and property to reshape the European legal state seems both theoretically and practically pertinent.

Conclusion

The concept of a Neo-Weberian State in the Pollitt-Bouckaert sense presents interesting opportunities for both policy and theoretical consideration.

- To what exogenous influences, if any, do the trajectories of public management reform in these states seem to be responding?
- Do reforms appear to reflect, on balance, the strength of those interests furthered by the globalization of capitalism or the assertion of possibly contrary societal interests?
- If societal influences are increasingly influential, does that mean that the capacity for coherent state action is weakening?
- Has the cumulative effect of global forces for change in the institutions of governance undermined the validity of path dependence as an explanation for the evolution of national administrative institutions?

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9 As Jeremy Rabkin (1987, 199) summarizes Madisonian logic: "Power is widely distributed [and] 'ambition' is 'made to check ambition' so there is less need to rely on 'enlightened statesmen' and 'higher motives.'" Wrote John Manley in 1983, “there is little doubt that pluralism is the dominant theory or paradigm of power among American social scientists” (Manley 1983, 368).
Or are we witnessing instead the mimetic isomorphism of reform ideas among the administrative elites of countries with hospitable institutional environments, nothing more?

With regard to the latter proposition, the editors of The Oxford Handbook of Public Management argued that “each country makes its own translation or adaptation” of its core ideas owing to differences in constitutions, institutions, administrative cultures and economic circumstances (Ferlie, Lynn and Pollitt 2005, 721). Despite the convergent rhetoric of managerialism, public management reform arguably remains primarily a national (and constitutional) matter (König 1997, Rohr 2002). Jos Raadschelders and Theo Toonen (1999, 60) argue that European public management reforms illustrate “how more or less uniform challenges may result in rather different responses and solutions” and thus in considerable national variation. The post-World War II expansion of European welfare states, they argue, has been redirected, not terminated. (Vincent Wright [1994] similarly notes that many states seek to modernize their states, not denigrate and dismantle them.) They continue (1999, 61):

Public sector reforms generally leave the existing state and administrative institutional structure intact. They do not, and probably cannot, fundamentally alter the constitutional principles upon which the welfare state could be built. In a globalizing world governmental response to social change will resort to familiar avenues until the citizenry decides it is time for fundamental changes. And only then the functions of the state rather than its tools will be subject to evaluation.

This proposition seems to be underscored by the essays in Walter Kickert’s recently published edited volume, The Study of Public Management in Europe and the US (2008): Germany evolves only slowly from its Rechtsstaat and corporatist traditions, France combines old and new traditions, albeit in some tension with one another; the emergence of managerialism in Napoleonic Spain is embryonic; and the United Kingdom, the most aggressive NPM reformer, may be breaking ground for a “new public governance” paradigm.

This is a good subject for a Trans-European Dialogue.
What is the “Neo-Weberian State”? (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004)

Weberian elements:

- Reaffirmation of the state as the main facilitator of solutions to the new problems of globalization, technological change, shifting demographics and environmental threat;
- Reaffirmation of the role of representative democracy (central, regional, and local) as the legitimating elements within the state apparatus;
- Reaffirmation of the role of administrative law—suitably modernized—in preserving the basic principles pertaining to the citizen-state relationship, including equality before the law, legal security, and the availability of specialized legal scrutiny of state actions;
- Preservation of the idea of a public service with a distinctive status, culture, and terms and conditions.

“Neo” elements:

- Shift from an internal orientation towards bureaucratic rules towards an external orientation towards meeting citizens’ needs and wishes. The primary route to achieving this is not the employment of market mechanisms (although they may occasionally come in handy) but the creation of a professional culture of quality and service.
- Supplementation (not replacement) of the role of representative democracy by a range of devices for consultation with, and the direct representation of, citizens’ views (this aspect being more visible in the northern European states and Germany at the local level than in Belgium, France or Italy).
- In the management of resources within government, a modernization of the relevant laws to encourage a greater orientation on the achievement of results rather than merely the correct following of procedure. This is expressed partly in a shift to the balance from *ex ante* to *ex post* controls, but not a complete abandonment of the former.
• A professionalization of the public service, so that the ‘bureaucrat’ becomes not simply an expert in the law relevant to his or her sphere of activity, but also a professional manager, oriented to meeting the needs of his or her citizens/users.
References


