



# Rethinking development administration and remembering Fred W. Riggs

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International Review of  
Administrative Sciences  
76(4) 767–773

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DOI: 10.1177/0020852310394320

ras.sagepub.com



In both theory and practice, the landscape of public administration has fundamentally changed in recent years in terms of unprecedented shifts in its ideological underpinning, structural configuration, and normative inclination largely based on market-driven assumptions or principles. These paradigmatic changes are encapsulated often as ‘New Public Management’ (NPM), which continues to draw considerable attention, especially in the form of divergence-convergence debate (Pollitt, 2002). It represents a more drastic transition in the developing world where the postcolonial state-centric model of public management, known as ‘Development Administration’, came under greater challenge posed by this newly emerging market-centered model. With few exceptions, the voluminous research and debate on the study and practice of NPM in developing nations have been relatively indifferent towards the compatibility of such a businesslike model with the contextual realities of these countries. The emergence of other sets of context-neutral propositions and/or models (e.g. best practices, good governance, etc) may have worsened the level of ambiguity in public administration in the developing world where the major domains of society are intensely interconnected (Riggs, 1964), and thus, complicated. In this regard, the reexamination of intellectual contribution made by Fred W. Riggs is crucial, as he devoted almost his entire lifetime’s work to exploring how the administrative systems in developing nations are considerably shaped by their contexts of politics, economy, and culture, and to why the Western models are relatively less relevant to (even dysfunctional in) such unique contexts.<sup>1</sup>

The selection of Fred Riggs’ widely known article, ‘Trends in the Comparative Study of Public Administration’ published in *IRAS* (Vol.18, No.1, 1962), for this 80th IIAS anniversary issue of *IRAS* is an appropriate choice for two reasons. First, as the journal’s editor Christopher Pollitt has highlighted in the preceding essay, *IRAS* is perhaps the oldest international refereed journal in public

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administration with a genuine comparative focus that adequately covers the administrative systems in developing countries, and Fred Riggs is one of the very few scholars who contributed immensely to the emergence of comparative public administration and to an in-depth understanding of public administration in these postcolonial countries. Second, among his major publications that offer grand ideas for further rethinking, this article provides an overall framework to decipher the major trends in cross-national comparative studies in public administration. However, since Pollitt has succinctly explained the article's main arguments and their relevance to the comparative administrative studies of OECD (developed) countries, this essay only briefly discusses the article's contribution in delineating these major trends, elaborates on Riggs' thoughts on development administration or administration in developing nations, and examines the relevance of such trend analyses and his other studies to the current administrative reforms in these countries.<sup>2</sup>

For Riggs, the impetus, ideas, and articulation of comparative public administration and its trends examined in this article could be explored in several sources, including the practical context of the Second World War, the Cold War, and contemporary American diplomacy. More specifically, on the one hand, the Second World War led to the international exposure of American scholars to the administrative systems in non-American settings (especially European and Asian) and made them interested in comparative studies. On the other hand, the US government initiatives (e.g. the Marshall Plan and the Point Four Program) for post-War reconstruction as well as for containing communist insurgency during the Cold War led to a significant expansion of US technical assistance for administrative training and research in developing nations (Nef and Dwivedi, 1981: 42; Schaffer, 1978: 181–185). Within the academic sphere, during the late 1940s and early 1950s, there were already questions raised regarding the universality of American public administration by Robert Dahl, Dwight Waldo and Herbert Simon; and the issue of contextual relevance was emphasized by Wallace Sayre and Herbert Kaufman in comparing public administrations. These practical and academic atmospheres constituted favorable conditions for Riggs to develop his comparative public administration framework based on a contextual or ecological perspective and structural-functional approach. In addition, he was the Chair of the Comparative Administration Group or CAG (created by the American Society for Public Administration in 1960) between 1960 and 1971, which provided him an opportunity to lead and set the directions of comparative administrative studies in developing nations, especially after the CAG received funding from the Ford Foundation. It is in this context that Riggs could demonstrate such keen interest in comparative administration, grasp the field's literature related to its overall scope and directions, and write such a holistic, agenda-setting article.

In this article, Riggs identifies three major trends in the comparative study of public administration. The first trend represents the shift from a normative approach emphasizing the ideal or desirable and universal principles of administrative behavior to a more empirical approach (covering both ideographic

and nomothetic studies) based on analyses of actual administrative situations (Riggs, 1962: 10–11). The second trend is the transition from an ideographic approach (reflected in studies of a single agency or country) to a nomothetic approach giving greater priority to generalizations, laws, and theory-building based on regular patterns of administrative behavior or institution. However, Riggs highlights the importance of both approaches: ‘nomothetic analyses would scarcely be possible without ideographic data . . . Hence the ideographic and nomothetic approaches are not alternative, but complementary, modes of study’ (Riggs, 1962: 12). The third trend is the shift from a non-ecological approach (evident in studies of formal administrative institutions without considering contextual influence) to a more ecological approach that emphasizes interaction between institutions and their contextual factors such as tradition, culture, religion, etc (Riggs, 1962). These major trends in comparative public administration are easily discernible in Riggs’ own intellectual trajectory, especially with regard to his moves towards more nomothetic and ecological interpretation of administration in developing nations or the so-called development administration.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of development administration evolved as an extension or an applied part of comparative public administration (Turner, 1997; Brinkerhoff, 2008), especially due to the CAG’s keen interest in exploring administrative problems in developing nations and the agenda set by its funding agency (the Ford Foundation) to improve administration for economic development in these countries (Riggs, 1970). Thus, Riggs mentions that the study of Third World administration, interpreted largely as development administration, became the central concern for and synonymous with comparative public administration (Riggs, 1991). As a concept, he defines development administration as the combined process of both the ‘administration of development’ (implementation of development policies and plans) and the ‘development of administration’ (improvement of administrative capabilities) (Riggs, 1970).

For nearly three decades (until the early 1980s), a massive volume of literature (books, journals, reports, etc) was produced by public administration scholars and policy experts to articulate and prescribe the nature, scope, objectives, structures, institutions, problems, and remedies of development administration (Weidner, 1970). While much of such literature tended to be normative in terms of prescribing the ideal universal tenets of development administration, Riggs was opposed to such a relatively non-ecological framework, and highlighted its inappropriateness and potential dysfunctional outcomes (Riggs, 1961, 1965). Instead he devoted much of his work to configuring an ecological approach in order to explain the actual features of administration (development administration) in developing nations shaped by their own societal contexts, and to articulating some nomothetic models of such administration with a new vocabulary constructed specifically to explain the unique administrative situation in these countries.

In this endeavor, Riggs began with a bipolar analytical framework known as the so-called *agraria-industria* model, which highlighted the contextual distinction of public administration between the traditional agrarian societies and modern

industrial nations (Riggs, 1957). While the *agraria* is characterized by self-contained and agriculture-based economy, family- or clan-based organization, divine authority source, and communalistic value; the *industria* possesses interdependent market economy, achievement-oriented organization, secular authority, individualistic value, and so on. Given such contextual variations, the administrative system in the *agraria* is characterized by politics-administration fusion, lack of specialization, and ritualistic action; but in the *industria*, it is based on politics-administration division, specialization, impersonal human relation, and functional action. In his research on public administration, Riggs continued to emphasize the importance of its contextual determinants (see Riggs, 1961).

However, since these extreme ideal-types, which hardly had any real-life examples, were not adequate to explain the nature of society and administration in the postcolonial developing nations, Riggs was searching for a more appropriate model. He eventually came up with a new analytical construct (known as the prismatic model) to explain these transitional nations. While doing his field work in Thailand (1957-58) and teaching in the Philippines (1958-59), Riggs articulated this prismatic model based on the metaphor of prism – as the fused white sunlight (which represents the fusion of several colours) passes through a prism, it becomes diffracted into several separate colours. Here the fused light signifies the fused structures of traditional society (single structure performing all necessary functions); the diffracted colours represent the specialized or differentiated structures of modern society (separate structures or institutions for major functions); and the situation within the prism (which is a transitional phase between the fused and diffracted stages) reflects the condition in developing nations, which Riggs began to define as prismatic societies (Riggs, 1964). In explaining the nature of administration in these transitional societies, Riggs systematically used an ecological approach to explore their non-administrative domains of society, politics, economy, and culture.

In general, such prismatic societies are characterized by formalism (theory-practice gap), heterogeneity (co-existence of the traditional and the modern), and functional overlaps (similar functions are performed by different institutions) (Riggs, 1964). These features are reflected in the prevalence of *polycommunalism* in society (interaction among communities based on suspicion and distrust); the *bazaar-canteen model* economy and its price-indeterminacy (caused by the influence of social status, bargaining capacity, and official position on economic behavior); and *polynormativism* in decision process (representing the use of both rational and non-rational criteria). These ecological or contextual factors, according to Riggs (1964), play significant role in shaping the nature of public administration in developing nations, which he presents as *sala* model administration characterized by the co-existence of universal official norms and respect for traditions, which is reflected in the influence of family and community on official decisions (e.g. nepotism and favoritism); prevalence of both ascriptive and achievement criteria leading to the 'attainment' norms in public offices; and so on. However, Riggs refined this prismatic model and added new dimensions to it during his entire career in order to

better understand the nature of public administration in developing countries based on an adequate understanding the role played by their unique ecological or contextual forces (Peng, 2008).

There are some major critics who consider Riggs' models too deductive and theoretical without adequate empirical basis; too static about the influence of external social forces; too indifferent towards social change; and too over-generalized on the basis of only few case studies (La Palombara, 1963; Subramaniam, 2000, 2001; Jreisat, 2005). Although there could be some truths in these critical observations, Riggs often offered adequate responses to these critics: that his theory-building was based on indepth case studies; that he maintained a balance between the ideographic and nomothetic approaches in his academic work; and that he was always against claiming the American administrative system as a universal model (Riggs, 2001). Irrespective of some of the alleged limits of Riggs' work, his theoretical models and arguments discussed above, are largely based on a nomothetic approach and an ecological perspective, as highlighted in this article selected for this anniversary issue of *IRAS*. The three trends identified in this article have relevance to the study of contemporary public administration in the developing world.

As briefly mentioned at the beginning, public administration in most developing countries has gone through drastic reforms based on the market-driven principles and models (e.g. NPM, Best Practices, Good Governance) which are often empirical-reductionist, ideographic, and non-ecological. These contemporary administrative models highlight the importance of narrow empirical data, performance indicators, and results or outcomes; focus largely on empirical case studies without any grand nomothetic generalization; and claim universal applicability in different parts of the world without much concern for ecological or contextual diversity.

*First*, during the recent decades, too many drastic and intensive reforms in public sector management have been adopted in too many countries, which need to be compared, critically understood, and systematically generalized to make some theoretical sense. The nomothetic approach outlined by Riggs in this *IRAS* article and applied in most of his other work can provide a valuable lesson in this regard. *Second*, the contemporary market-driven reform models have largely been based on a universalist approach, which has been embraced in many developing nations often under the influence of international agencies, although such models may not be appropriate for these countries with weak private capital and entrepreneurship, less developed market forces and alarming levels of poverty requiring subsidized basic services. In this regard, the message inherent in the ecological approach suggested by Riggs needs to be taken seriously into account. *Third*, in line with the common imitative nature of administrative reforms adopted in the past, many regimes in developing countries have recently introduced pro-market models originating and borrowed from the experience of developed nations. Riggs always opposed such contextless imitative reforms and emphasized the importance of building the nationally or domestically suitable models of public administration in these countries based on their own contexts and needs (Riggs, 2001).

Finally, unlike advanced industrial nations where the major domains of society (e.g. politics, economy, business, religion, and administration) are relatively autonomous or mutually exclusive, these domains are deeply interconnected in developing societies, which requires a multi-dimensional approach and an interdisciplinary perspective practiced and underscored by Riggs. His multi-disciplinary scholarship is evident in the use of multiple sources of ideas and constructs (especially from sociology, comparative politics, economics, and public administration), the diversity in his research areas (administration, ethnicity, presidentialism, and globalization), and in the recognition of his work in major fields of study beyond public administration.<sup>1</sup>

The heydays of comparative public administration and development administration saw considerable progress in administrative theory-building, the emergence of some paradigmatic consensus, and an expansion of critical discourse on the subject.<sup>2</sup> But since the early 1980s, the emergence and worldwide proliferation of neoliberal policies and reforms and the corresponding intellectual shifts towards businesslike analytical framework have led to the relative marginalization (if not total replacement) of such a comparative research tradition (Peters, 1994). It can be argued that compared to the three progressive trends of comparative public administration traced by Riggs in this IRAS article, the current trends in the field appear to be quite disjointed, incoherent, and thus, uncertain.

## Notes

1. In 1999, one whole panel of the International Studies Association Conference (15-20 February, Washington), titled 'Riggs' Work Evaluated', was devoted to evaluate Riggs' intellectual contribution to major multi-disciplinary issues, including comparative bureaucracy, development studies, ethnicity, constitutionalism, presidentialism, globalization and democracy.
2. For instance, *Administrative Science Quarterly* published a Special Issue (Vol.5, No.1) in 1960 on 'Comparative Public Administration', and *Public Administration Review* published a symposium (Vol.36, No.6) on 'Comparative and Development Administration: Retrospect and Prospect'.

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