

# REFLECTIONS ON PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT IN A POST-NPM, POST-COVID-19 AND POST-WILSONIAN WORLD

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## ABSTRACT

*The year 2020 is an epochal moment for governance and public administration. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has upset social and economic life, including the delivery of public services, and eroded domestic and international politics. It comes in an era of uncertainty resulting from the end of the New Public Management boom and a looming breakdown of the contemporary US-defined international order. Against such a sea change, we can hardly take business as usual. Change breeds indeterminacy but also induces reimagining. Any renewal and renaissance of public management has to address the 'what' and 'how' questions of governance in a low-trust and high-risk society. Both the capacity and legitimacy of the state need to be re-empowered, but no longer through the market. The dual failure of democratic politics and bureaucratic excellence in many countries has rendered the Wilsonian politics-administration dichotomy redundant. Amid the rise of East Asia, there are growing contentions over the conceptualization of meritocracy as alternative systems of governance and public service models seem to be delivering effective rivals. Governance performance may not be predetermined by regime types within a poly-polar world. We need to search for new reconnections, new leadership, a new basis for trust and consensus, and a new public service bargain to avoid getting bogged down in old wine in re-labelled bottle, or another singular universalist paradigm.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The year 2020 is an epochal moment for public administration. The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be more than a deadly public health threat beyond original expectations – with 247.14 million confirmed infection cases and 5.01 million deaths by 1 November 2021 ([Our World in Data, n.d.](#)). It has also eroded domestic and international politics and upset social and economic life, including the delivery of public services ([Accenture, 2020](#); [Ansell et al., 2020](#); [OECD, 2021](#)). It comes in an era of uncertainty resulting from the end of the New Public Management (NPM) boom and a looming breakdown of the contemporary US-defined international order first started by Woodrow Wilson at the beginning of the twentieth century ([Mazarr et al., 2016](#), Chapter 2). Against such a sea change in the ‘big picture’, we can hardly take business as usual.

This chapter is not about administrative changes and reforms within a particular country or region, nor specific public sector management innovations and practices. No doubt those changes and reforms on the ground are important, which continue to be driven by both domestic factors and external influences ([Cheung, 2020](#)). One needs, however, to appreciate the thrust of larger contextual transformations as well as more subtle shifts that have significant implications for the future course of public administration. Change breeds indeterminacy but also induces new thinking and reimagining, which is the theme of this book.

Public administration (and management) is rooted and practised within specific institutions of public governance grounded in the prevailing political system, political economy and society. It is not just about ‘neutral’ instrumentalities, methods and techniques that can easily cross all seasons and cultures. The nature of ‘publicness’ matters and institutions matter ([North, 1990](#); [Przeworski, 2004](#)). In light of the transformation taking place, the question is whether renewal and renaissance requires only a readjustment or a more fundamental rethink. The present signs seem to point to the latter. A basic challenge is that modern society is a risk society ([Beck, 1992](#)) increasingly subject to all kinds of human-made ‘manufactured’ risks, high-tech and financial risks, or catastrophes originating from nature but made worse by human actions or the lack of interventions.

The current era of crisis is characterized by the 2Cs – climate change and COVID-19 pandemic – and crisis mutates and causes further crises across other domains. A major test of governance nowadays is the capacity of public institutions (and society at large) to respond to and manage crises. This is where another C-risk is encountered, namely the decline in capacity, which poses an imminent challenge to all governments and public organizations ([Ansell et al., 2021](#)). Both governance capacity and governance legitimacy are critical to crisis management, which entails the building of organizational capacity, mobilization and coordination of public resources, as well as managing public perceptions and securing trust ([Lægrevik and Rykkja, 2019](#)).

At the same time, there has been growing evidence of disillusionment with the three foundations of contemporary public administration: representative democracy; the feasibility of competent and rules-bound ethical public service free from political interference; and scientific administration. There is also a backlash against administration *as* management. It can be said that our world has entered a 'post' era because it is *post*-NPM (given the demise of NPM), *post*-globalization (given the upsurge of anti-globalization sentiments), *post*-democracy (given the failure and crisis of the conventional democratic system), and *post*-Wilsonian (given *both* the malfunctioning of the Wilsonian politics-administration dichotomy and the erosion of the Wilsonian interpretation of international order). To add to all this, there is also talk of the *post*-COVID-19 era bringing along a 'new normal' to many aspects of public and private life (Friedman, 2020). Past foundations and assumptions have been shaken; new uncertainties have emerged.

## PAST TRAJECTORY OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT

As we ponder the future, it is useful to briefly review the past trajectory. Woodrow Wilson, Max Weber and Frederick Taylor laid the foundation for classical public administration (Hood, 2000, p. 76) which had evolved in tandem with the rise of democracy (hence the notion of democratic administration) during the last century. Within the context of US Progressivism, Wilson's (1887) doctrine in separating politics from administration had been instrumental in delineating an institutional and theoretical space for the growth of public administration. Envisioning administration as a non-partisan pursuit to serve all people, he believed that administration would be best served in a 'businesslike' fashion and spoke of the sanctity of the civil service.

The Weberian bureaucratic paradigm was supposed to embrace rationality, legality and efficiency (Waters and Waters, 2015). Taylorism added a flavour of scientific management (Taylor, 1911/1997). Although the ideal of public service was supported by a public service ethos to which the values of honesty, integrity and impartiality were attributed, such ethos had been undermined by some subsequent developments (O'Toole, 2006). Inherent tensions and paradoxes were exposed. The backlash against bureaucracy was first seen in the 1960s–1970s, notably the Downsian critique of bureaucracy (Downs, 1965), Niskanen's (1968) 'budget-maximizing' critique and the distrust of Big Government. It eventually led to the ascendancy of 'privatization' in the 1980s as the key to better government (Savas, 1987, 2000).

Prior to the privatization boom, there was a short-lived movement in the US during the early 1970s championing 'New Public Administration' (NPA) inspired by Dwight Waldo to address the shortfalls of democratic politics (Marini, 1971), as well as calls for a 'representative bureaucracy' (Kingsley, 1944; Krislov, 2012). NPA tried to revamp the ethical obligations of the public service to rebuild the public's trust of government which was plagued by political corruption and

vicious partisan interests. It was assumed possible to rely on a socially-aware and action-oriented public service (i.e. a 'new' bureaucracy) to check and right the wrongs of a corrupted political democracy. Such last-ditch effort did not stop the onslaught of privatization, the tenet of which did not just rest upon using the private sector and commercial means as tools, but more broadly deferring to the 'private' (as opposed to the traditional 'public') as the preferred paradigm of governing, to bring about entrepreneurial management (London, 2002).

When privatization finally took centre stage in the 1980s, both electoral politics and bureaucracy had largely lost their charm. Traditional public service ethos was in decline. Backed by a neoliberal ideology, the next phase saw the rebuilding, reconfiguration or rescue of public administration through the market – in the form of New Public Management (NPM) (Hood, 1991; Lane, 2000). The advent of NPM, as if a revolutionary force, followed the widely perceived failure of post-War Big Government and an escalating fiscal crisis that triggered privatization, marketization and public-private partnership. In the process, the market doctrine had overridden the previous logics of democratic politics and bureaucratic administration. NPM came as several variants, some still emphasizing the public sector as distinct from private business operations, including a defensive response depicted by Dunleavy (1986, 1991) as a bureau-shaping strategy and reforms to save the bureaucracy though 'Reinventing Government' (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993).

Whichever way one looks at it, the 'private' had essentially won the war. The NPM paradigm saw its most glorious times after the fall of Soviet communism and the acclaimed 'End of History' (*a la* Fukuyama, 1992). Even social democratic politics embraced NPM as part of modernizing government and reinvigorating social democracy, represented by the 'Third Way' vision (Giddens, 1998). In North American and European politics, the rise of the Third Way as articulated by Bill Clinton and Tony Blair (Edsall, 1998), or Gerhard Schröder's *Neue Mitte* (New Centre), was symbolic of newfound optimism that the market could be made to work to address social equality and ensure responsive and responsible government.

Taking administration and politics together, the process of reinventing and modernizing government was supported by new conceptualizations and organization models of public governance with emphasis on the customerization of citizens, marketization of public goods and services, outcome orientation through performance pledges and measurement, and in essence, an objectivist approach to public administration and management. In addition, classical public administration had also been challenged by Post-modern Public Administration from a deconstructionist perspective (King, 2005). Despite several phases of transformation, it can be said that the main discourses of public administration throughout the twentieth century, whether Herbert Simon's (1947/1997) administrative rationality or NPM's market rationality, had shared the distinctly modern sensibility for the superiority of science, the faith in the idea of progress, and the desire for rational explanation (Marshall, 1997).

## TURNING POINTS

The new millennium at first seemed to be sailing smoothly into a globalizing world displaying connectedness, interdependence and confidence in neoliberalism and democracy – the so-called Washington Consensus (Williamson, 1989; Babb and Kentikelenis, 2021). However, enthusiasm was soon dampened by the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) and ensuing mega-changes. Anti-globalization sentiments crept in, switching from an original left-wing (Global South) critique of neoliberalism to become a right-wing populist appeal as more people in the developed world (Global North) consider themselves ‘losers’ and wage wholesale attack on what is represented by economic globalization (The Conversation, 2018). Amid escalating geopolitical conflicts, the emergence of Asia and alternative paths to governance, the twentieth-century Wilsonian international order is gradually laid to rest (Mead, 2021).

### *The Rise and Fall of Neoliberalism (and of NPM)*

Three major turning points could be detected over the past three decades. The *first* turning point was the ascendancy of neoliberal globalization after the fall of Soviet and East European communism – as marked by the ‘End of History’ thesis. The Washington Consensus began to dominate governments, international organizations and think tanks after the 1998–2000 Asian Financial Crisis (AFC).

The advent of globalization, propagated by Thomas Friedman’s (2005) best-seller, *The World is Flat*, also expedited the spread of the NPM movement (Common, 1998), making NPM a broad church for public sector management and reforms. By the end of the twentieth century, when the East Asian Economic Miracle (World Bank, 1993) and its associated merit of state developmentalism seemed to be overturned by the AFC, the megatrend and charm of neoliberalism in the political, economic, social, cultural and ideological spheres became unstoppable. NPM ethos had crossed cultural barriers to gain prominence in Asia and some developing countries, though often for different reasons with varying results, and sometimes in state- and bureaucracy-friendly contexts (Cheung, 2005).

Yet, the optimism about globalization and NPM did not last long. The GFC in 2008–2009 was the *second* turning point, following which there was a serious backlash against globalization as social and economic contradictions intensified. Termed a financial tsunami in Asia, GFC had shattered the dream of a brave new global world of liberal democracy and market economy to extend the institutional logic of the last century. It had also exposed the innate defects of Washington Consensus-style governance, spilling over to public sector management according to NPM. The Third Way was soon in retreat. Neoliberalism was much weakened if not fully discredited (Sitaraman, 2019; Stiglitz, 2019). NPM had aged (Hood and Peters, 2004) and considered reaching its end (Levy, 2010). Economic nationalism had returned as the forerunner of wider currents of inward-looking populism (The Economist, 2009).

In a way, globalization has both facilitated and defeated NPM. This notwithstanding, given institutions evolve along path dependency, most public administration and management systems in practice would see the existence of a

layering process of successive models, rather than a linear substitution process from one model to another (Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). The actual landscape is more likely an institution where ‘some aspects of the OPA [old public administration] have been combined with NPM and PG [public governance] features to create organizational forms in which governance and management elements coexist with other reform features’ (Iacovino et al., 2017). In any case, public administration and management have entered an uncertain post-NPM era, with no new dominant paradigm in sight.

Some countries are still pursuing NPM-like reforms while others are exploring alternative paths and reflecting on the excesses of NPM (De Vries and Nemec, 2013). Those concerned about the extremes of a neoliberal NPM regime have turned to notions of ‘New Public Governance’ (NPG) emphasizing network governance, government-society collaboration, and trust (Osborne, 2006). In the aftermath of the backlash against NPM, there are also voices calling for a ‘New Public Service’ based on democratic values, citizenship, and service in the public interest (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2015), somewhat like NPA in the 1970s. The king (NPM) is dead, but where and who is the new king?

#### *Decline in Social Trust and Setback in Democracy*

The *third* turning point saw the decline in institutionalized democracy and the upsurge of distrust in the society and polity. Most would agree that social trust is crucial to public governance and indicative of social capital. Yet over the past decade, public trust is ebbing away. People in many countries find government, business, mass media and even NGOs no longer trustworthy.

According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2021), a majority surveyed believed that government leaders (57%), business leaders (56%), and journalists (59%) were purposely trying to mislead people, and the traditional media (53%) saw the largest drop in trust at eight percentage points. The mass population was more distrustful than the informed public, with double-digit trust gaps in most countries/regions monitored. Because of how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled, public confidence in government fell sharply from 65% in May 2020 to 53% by year-end. Those countries still enjoying relatively high public trust in government were all in Asia, such as China, India, Indonesia and Singapore. Several European countries were in the low-trust zone, such as the US, UK, France, Spain and Russia.

Equally alarming is that the degree of public trust does not correlate with institutionalized democracy or regime types. The excitement about the ‘Third Wave of Democratization’ (Huntington, 1991) has subsided and the world is entering an era beyond the ‘End of History’ (Hobson, 2009; Fasting, 2021). Democracy is in crisis. According to the Global Democracy Index compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit, a sliding trend in democracy has been particularly acute in the past several years. The 2020 global score of 5.37 out of 10 was the lowest recorded since the index began in 2006, with a drop in democratic freedoms in 116 out of 167 countries (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2021). Only 8.4% of the world’s population was living in what was defined as a full democracy while more than a third under authoritarian and autocratic rule.

### *The Rise of Politics of Fear and Populism*

The surging crisis of political and social trust, made worse by post-truth politics and anti-establishment social media, paves the way for the upswing of radical populism across the right-left spectrum as ideological, cultural, ethnic, political and economic cleavages all deepen, accompanied by increasing economic nationalism and institutional nationalism. Identity politics have quickly substituted traditional class issues as the new politics of the millennial generation becomes intermediated and fed by social media on internet.

Instead of hope about the future, there is now a widespread ‘politics of fear’ even in developed societies (Wodak, 2015) – fear of the unknown: a fear of the ‘other’, a fear of the future. Such fear reflects what the Zygmunt Bauman described as *Unsicherheit* – ‘that complex combination of uncertainty, insecurity, and lack of safety’ (Kraus, 2003, p. 668), resulting from the economic, social and cultural consequences of globalization, and their entanglement with national, regional and local contexts. It lies behind the rapid rise of populism and nativism which has become a growing threat to mainstream democratic politics and the stability of political institutions in the US and Europe.

In this regard, the gradual ‘mainstreaming’ of some anti-establishment, anti-bureaucratic, anti-partisan and even anti-politics movements into electoral politics is particularly noteworthy. The rapid rise of the M5S (Five Star Movement) in Italy and AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) in Germany are cases in point. M5S entails two contradictory connections: between hyper-democracy and Bonapartism on the one hand and between hyper-politics and de-politicization on the other (Caruso, 2017). From its Eurosceptic beginnings in 2013 to its increasing extremism, AfD mirrors the path of emerging far-right forces across much of Western Europe (Bochum, 2020).

Kaya (2019) explains how five populist parties in Europe – namely AfD in Germany, FN (National Front, now renamed National Rally) in France, PVV (Party for Freedom, *Partij voor de Vrijheid*) in the Netherlands, M5S in Italy, and Golden Dawn in Greece – employ the fear of Islam as a political instrument to mobilize their supporters and to mainstream themselves. Displaying common Islamophobic, migrant-phobic, and diversity-phobic tropes, they have developed a civilizational discourse to expand their electorate. A neo-Fascist tendency is also being germinated through extreme populism as seen, for example, in AfD. The present tensions between the US-led Western camp and China could similarly be construed within another kind of civilizational conflict with supportive nationalist cum populist discourses on both sides.

## **GLOBAL GEOPOLITICS AND GLOBAL PANDEMIC**

The changing global geopolitical environment is impacting not only international relations but also the prospect of public administration as a worldwide prototype and common body of practices as we know it. Most notably, the disintegration of Wilsonian international order was marked by both rules-bound and non-rules-bound competition, and the rise of ‘new powers’ in Asia. East-West rivalry,



previously played out in Europe before the collapse of the Soviet Union, has moved to Asia. With escalating US-China conflict across various spheres, the world is facing not just a clash of civilizations, but also a clash of systems and values in governance underpinned by diverse ideological and cultural orientations (Kynge, 2018; Pepinsky and Weiss, 2021). The world order that shapes the future destiny of humanity is subject to more conflicting visions and interpretations.

Arguably, Western civilization can no longer serve as the sole cornerstone of governance, and liberal democracy may not be the 'End of History' as earlier assumed in the heat of American triumphalism. The world has become less unipolar. Donald Trump has destroyed illusions about American democracy. President Joe Biden now strives to restore American power and leadership, through reconsolidating G7 and NATO and forging a grand alliance that also includes Australia, India and South Korea to counter 'autocracy'. It sounds like a Washington Consensus 2.0, to underscore Washington's commitment to democratic renewal in the post-Trump era (Brown et al., 2020). But this is not going to be smooth sailing because the normal has vastly changed in global geopolitics.

Over the past decade, China has attained greater self-confidence in its unique 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' steered by a reinvigorated party-state system closely integrating state, economy and society. It is also displaying a more assertive foreign policy with prominent political and military elements on the global scene. Some observe that China's leaders look to push for a more balanced world order to counter American 'hegemonism' (Eisenman and Heginbotham, 2019). In the post-End of History era, US supremacy has to confront the challenges posed not only by the rise of China representing a different set of political, institutional and cultural logics, but also the revival of Russia not willing to succumb to a liberal democratic destiny determined by the US following the demise of the Soviet Union. Even India, the world's most populous democracy, is increasingly moving towards a narrow nationalism of Hindu fundamentalism. At the same time, a reversion to state-dominated governance under strong-man rule is seen in some Central and Eastern European countries like Poland and Hungary.

Given the impressive rise of East Asia, one cannot avoid facing the big question of why Oriental authoritarianism in China (one-party socialist state) and Singapore (one-party dominated parliamentary democracy) has been functioning so well as observed vividly in the current COVID-19 challenge. There are growing contentions over the conceptualization of meritocracy as alternative systems of governance and public service models seem to be delivering effective rivals in these two countries (Bell, 2015; Wong, 2013). One has to recognize that the East Asian traditions of state and bureaucracy have always been markedly different from the European/North American traditions especially in terms of state-society and state-economy relatedness (Cheung, 2013).

The rise of Asia, in the words of Mahbubani (2008), will bring about an equally significant transformation just as the rise of the West had transformed the world in the past two centuries. He argues that for a long period the Asians (Chinese, Indians, Muslims and others) had been bystanders in world history. Now they are ready to become co-drivers. Asians have finally understood,



absorbed and implemented Western best practices in many areas: from free-market economics to modern science and technology, from meritocracy to rule of law. They have also become innovative in their own way, creating new patterns of cooperation not seen in the West. Asians will increasingly see Asia through Asian eyes, not Euro-centric or Western eyes, and 'Asian Values' form part of the cultural politics (Sheridan, 1999, pp. 2–3; Barr, 2004). Rachman (2017) even deploys an 'Easternization' thesis to argue about Asia's transformation and the gradual collapse of the post-War global order previously dominated by the US-led West (and for a few decades the Soviet Union as well).

The last straw that would break the camel's back comes from the Covid-19 pandemic which is eroding some previous assumptions and practices in governance, public administration and public sector management. Even Friedman (2020) has alluded to a BC (Before Coronavirus) and AC (After Coronavirus) dividing line. Upon the outbreak of the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic which paralyzed many developed economies, more so in North America and Europe as compared to East Asia and the Oceania in 2020, there has been growing concern about state capacity and capabilities in crisis management. The global economy has become more volatile and uncertain. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF)'s (2021, p. xiii) forecast, cumulative per capita income losses over 2020–22, compared to pre-pandemic projections, are equivalent to 11% of 2019 per capita GDP in advanced economies and 20% in emerging markets and developing economies (excluding China). All markets have suffered significant economic setback in 2020, at -4.7% in advanced economies and -2.2% in emerging market and developing economies, with China the only one scoring a positive growth, at 2.3% (IMF, 2021, Table 1).

COVID-19 will result in recasting the performance of different economies. As The Economist (2020) puts it, new winners and losers will emerge when the recovery takes place. The economic lesson so far is that the role of the state is highly critical in combating the pandemic. The experience of various countries and regions has underscored the indispensability of state interventions in protecting lives and livelihood and in saving the economy. Bigger-than-expected economic shocks have pushed most countries towards hastening changes in the economy and providing extensive packages to keep jobs and help businesses stay afloat. Governments, irrespective of ideology, have resorted to deficit and debt financing. The longer-term implications on social and economic life as well as political and public attitudes would be of a scale larger than GFC.

Such a major turnaround within a shifting international economic order makes it unrealistic to expect any return to the past regime. In a way we are witnessing a phenomenon of 'bringing the state back in' (yet again) paraphrasing Jessop (2001) (see also Skocpol et al., 1985). Meanwhile pre-existing dysfunctional politics, as discussed above, will continue to induce new divides and discontent. Anti-globalization sentiments and populism may get worse. The 'new' state is unlikely to be a state of nationalization or replication of the post-War welfare state. Traditional politics in support of the state are being subverted as previously fringe parties and movements come to capture the mainstream. Such

an immense transformation of both the state and economy should be factored into any serious rethinking of governance and public administration.

Fukuyama (2020) observed at an early stage of COVID-19 that state capacity and performance in pandemic control were not primarily determined by regime types: ‘Some democracies have performed well, but others have not, and the same is true for autocracies. The factors responsible for successful pandemic responses have been state capacity, social trust, and leadership’. Indeed, countries with a competent state apparatus, a government that their people trust and listen to, and effective leadership (notably China and Singapore) have performed quite impressively, limiting the damage they have suffered. In many countries, including Western democracies, these three elements are in deficit within their system of governance. They are crucial not only for pandemic responses, but also for effective governance at large. A ‘new’ understanding of politics is thus called for.

## RECONCEPTUALIZING THE STATE AND GOVERNANCE

Where do we stand now? Facing the paradox of governance and public policy at this critical juncture, several points can be made as part of a preliminary assessment. To begin with, public administration and management needs a new departure. Both the traditional regime and NPM have already lost their appeal. As the COVID-19 shock so vividly shows, there are inherent tensions between policy based on science versus policy based on politics and contingencies (King, 2016). Politics are turning more populist and made more sensational and radical (or extreme) by the internet and social media. The world order is open to more conflicts and rivalries. A process of rebalancing is ongoing. In addition to Western civilization, the rise of Asia is bringing new perspectives and paradigms for the coming era. Alternative governance and welfare models, some emanating from the Eastern experiences, cultures and practices, will spur multiple paths towards a broader modernity and governance within a multipolar world. Common pursuits should be able to co-exist with diverse economic, cultural and institutional experiences and preferences, especially in facing up to major global threats like Climate Change and COVID-19.<sup>1</sup>

COVID-19 has certainly impressed us that a risk society and crisis governance now form part of the ‘new normal’. Different countries and systems have responded to the COVID-19 challenge with varying strengths and performance outcomes. The ‘new normal’ also means that public service and management can no longer be business as usual, whether in terms of structures, processes or service delivery modes. At the same time innovation technology is redefining the public-private and government-society interface. Many of the capabilities established out of necessity during extraordinary time have formed the new normal of public service delivery (Accenture, 2020) altering functioning patterns and home-office, home-business, home-school, provider-user and cross-agency/sector interfaces at both the local and global levels. All this requires a rethinking of the *modus operandi*, service supply chains, informatics, and risk awareness. A

new hybrid form embracing both online and offline, physical and virtual, and old and new technologies will survive the COVID-19 disruptions, with lasting impact on government and the market.

Venturing into a new and uncertain era, any renewal and renaissance of public management has to confront the 'what' and 'how' questions of governance in a low-trust and high-risk society under the new normal. Both the state's capacity and legitimacy need to be re-empowered, but no longer through the market. The dual failure of democratic politics and bureaucratic excellence in many countries has rendered the Wilsonian politics-administration dichotomy redundant. In the post-NPM and post-Wilsonian era, how can the bureaucracy and government still be trusted to deliver good or good enough governance? We have arguably passed the stage of blind optimism about NPM, NPG and even Network Governance (Assens and Lemeur, 2016) and need to search for new reconnections, new leadership, a new basis for trust and consensus, and a new public service bargain to avoid getting bogged down in old wine in re-labelled bottle, or another singular universalist paradigm that lacks cultural and historical sensibilities. Governance performance may not be predetermined by regime types within a more diverse world context.

To regain trust in bureaucracy and government, there is a need to reformulate the purpose of public governance and state-society collaboration. In the absence of any shared vision and purpose, such collaboration, even on a wider network governance premise, may just be more of a façade. Public governance has to be grounded in the realities of a more complicated 'public' context where diversity and disjointedness have become the norm. At these critical times, responding to the crisis of the politics of fear, it is crucial to have the capacity to rebuild public trust and leadership (especially moral leadership) and to reconnect elites and citizens, and state and society (Demos, 2017, Chapter 7). Contemplating state-society collaboration in the post-COVID-19 era, should it become more state-centred as opposed to society-centred, and is there still a purposefulness that can bring the two domains together?

We are presently facing a theoretical vacuum. Some of the assumptions behind the previous understanding of public sector management – including public-private interface, state-society and state-economy relationships, democratic political practice, traditional public service ethos, tools of government and so on – might have to be reconsidered. We have also to factor in the paradox of promoting some 'universal' values and principles while fully appreciating 'national' and 'local' differences in practices and conditions. Different systems will have to rise to the challenge differently, some moving along the same trajectory with readjustment and revised editions, but others seeking breakthroughs by becoming more alert to their historical, cultural and institutional legacies. Cultural sensitivities matter but have not been sufficiently emphasized in the mainstream public administration literature partly because that literature internationally was too dominated by Euro-centric and US-centric discussions in the past which had assumed a high degree of civilizational homogeneity or convergence.

When NPM was exerting significant influence on administrative reforms around the world including Asia, trends could still be detected to search for an Asian way that had better ‘fit’ with the domestic conditions and national legacies (Cheung, 2013). Taking China as an example, a study has found that while the literature on Chinese public administration in English publications indicates fields of concern not dissimilar to Western developed countries (such as: non-profit management, emergency management, inter-governmental relations, public-private partnership, environmental protection, climate change, and performance management and improvement), the predominant tendency to apply Western concepts and theories to East Asian contexts without establishing clear boundary conditions remains a challenge (Kim et al., 2018). In due course, non-Western cultural reflections on the future of governance and public administration will attract more attention in the international discourses.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

This chapter has raised many more questions than answering them. Hopefully posing the right questions is as important as knowing all the answers. In the autumn of 1942, though the Allies’ performance at the Eastern Front and North Africa seemed to be turning around, Winston Churchill said: ‘This is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning’ (International Churchill Society, n.d.). This may be a good quote to depict the present historical juncture in public administration and management because while the tradition of contemporary public administration since the beginning of the last century, as well as the era of NPM that has dominated the reform agenda for almost the past three decades, seem to be in decline, we are nowhere near the point of celebrating the beginning of a new dawn. We do not know what the future might hold for us, but what we should be certain about is that we are in a transition, where ‘the end of the beginning’ and ‘the beginning of the end’ may be two sides of the same coin. As the new era unfolds, one thing may well become certain, i.e., the end of ‘End of History’ and of universalism.

## NOTE

1. The Glasgow Climate Pact adopted at the COP26 Summit on 13 November 2021 represents a hard-won deal despite falling behind in targets to limit warming to 1.5°C as set out in the 2015 Paris Accord and in phasing out coal. It is also encouraging to see China and the US, though in acrimonious rivalry, issue a joint agreement at COP26 to boost climate co-operation over the next decade.

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