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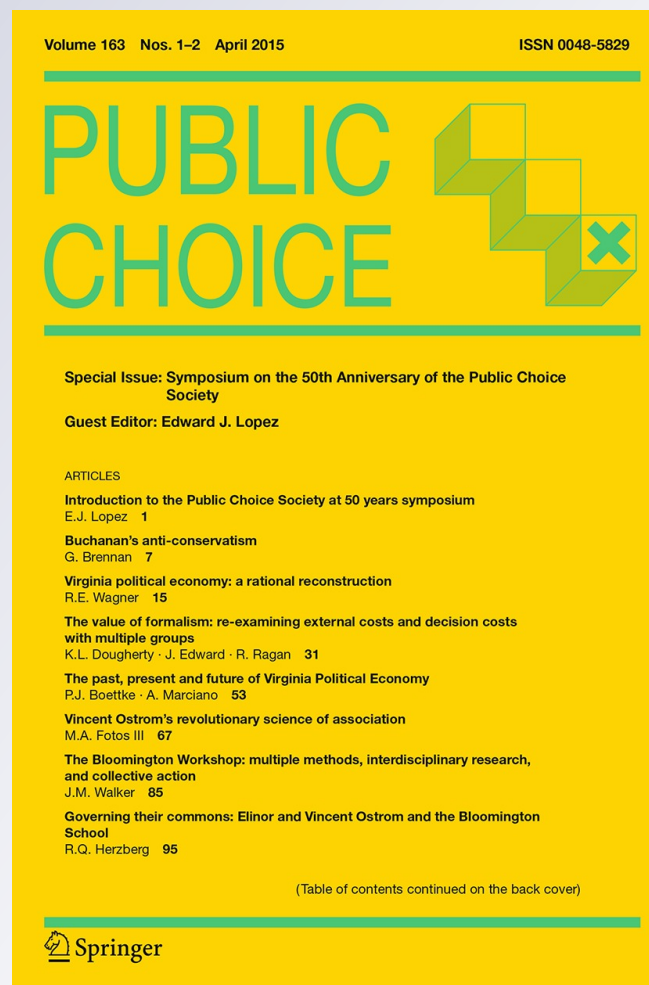
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Public Administration, Public Choice and the Ostroms: the achievements, the failure, the promise

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Abstract The paper explores the Public Administration roots and facets of the Bloomington School of Public Choice and Institutional Theory and in doing that, it revisits the problem of the applied dimension of Public Choice. The paper investigates and documents the nature, significance and reception of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom's work, approaching it as a pioneering attempt to promote a double agenda: on the one hand, to advance Public Choice theory as a paradigm shift in Public Administration, and on the other, to advance Public Administration as the preeminent applied domain of Public Choice theory.

Keywords Public Administration · Public Policy · Normative Theory · Institutional Theory · Institutional Design

1 Introduction

The Presidential Address to the Public Choice Society meeting in New Orleans in 2006 was dedicated by Steven Brams to a direction “for the most part ignored in the scholarly literature on public choice”: the use of the theory and insights of this research program “to propose and to try to implement reforms that we deem desirable”. Central to the Address was the observation that largely missing from the Public Choice paradigm “are attempts to translate research findings into actions that might improve how individual and collective choices are made” and that it is crucial to “distinguish these efforts from those who never tire of finding fault with a policy or program but do not propose constructive alternatives” (Brams 2006, p. 246).

In the years since Brams made those remarks, efforts have been made to move in the direction indicated, yet the progress has been slow and timid. Hence, Brams's criticism continue to be as apt now as then. It seems that the step he advocated doesn't come easily;

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it doesn't grow naturally and spontaneously from the equilibrium in which the current stage of the research program has stabilized. A more robust and methodical push-forward is needed. And in this respect, a closer look at what could mean and entail concretely, more precisely, the advance towards action and policy, may help us to understand how such a desired leap forward may be accomplished. What does it mean, more precisely, to think in terms of applicable "constructive alternatives" to the status quo? To answer that, one needs to answer a related question: what is implied institutionally, strategically and organizationally in the process of translating research findings into action? Once the approach takes a pragmatic, practical turn, the first thing to note is that, one is aware of it or not, one likes it or not, policy and institutional change is executed in modern societies through the Public Administration apparatus. That means that to avoid being just another form of "ideal-theory" or a peculiar and technically sophisticated form of "critical theory", Public Choice has to profoundly and programmatically engage the territory of an already established domain, the field and practice of Public Administration.

There are two reasons that make this inevitable: the first is rather general and has already been suggested. Before discussing specific public policies and initiatives—policy theory, policy design, policy implementation, policy evaluation—one needs to deal with the institutional and constitutional arrangements that set up the stage for policy action, to factor in realistically the organizational and administrative instruments, the formal and informal rules of the game in place. Irrespective of the nature of the disciplinary knowledge of relevance (be it based in sociology, Political Science, macroeconomics or Public Choice), using that knowledge to address policy issues means dealing with the mechanisms and processes of the modern administrative state. Even when those very policies require changing the structure and operation of those very mechanisms, the approach is the same. It is a "social reflexivity" task: changing institutional arrangements through (sometimes the very same) institutional arrangements.

And thus, we have come to the second reason, closer to the core of the Public Choice project, and more specific to it. There are many situations in which implementing a public policy requires a change of rules, incentives and processes, i.e., something that goes beyond a simple, basic operational level implementation of a policy decision in a given setting. In fact, a large part of the reforms and policy implications emerging from the insights of the Public Choice research program are precisely about the institutional structure of the administrative state and its functioning at all of its different levels: from the lowest, the operational one, to the highest, constitutional choice. The Public Choice approach to public policy is by its nature mostly indirect: to go, by way of institutional and incentive structures to deal with the ecology of decision making in different settings, to analyze the various patterns of cooperation and coordination in specific architectures of choice. But, at a closer look, this is exactly the domain of Public Administration: the institutional and organizational engineering of the architecture of Public Choice. Public Administration is first and foremost about the building, maintaining and operating in real-life structures and processes that function as preconditions the infrastructure and determinants of real-life public policies and their management. From the operation of the electoral system to the implementation of macroeconomic policies, from the monitoring and enforcement of constitutional rules to the regulatory framework of the market, the apparatus of Public Administration is vital. Seen in this light, it looks like Public Administration and Public Choice are connected intrinsically, they seem to be different facets of the same coin. In brief, Public Choice, whether one is aware of it or not, whether one likes it or not, is, when it comes to the applications, more about Public Administration than about anything else.

Thus we come to realize that it may be the case that the current incapacity of the Public Choice program to effectively move to the policy and applied stage may have something to do with the way the domain of Public Administration is perceived (or misperceived) and approached (or sidestepped). But this is also the point when we realize that the resources to overcome this predicament (or at least to understand it better) are already there, in the Public Choice tradition. Although today this fact seems ignored or forgotten, the truth is that the Public Choice revolution was from the very beginning strongly rooted precisely in the field of Public Administration. Looking back at its own history, it may be the case that some important clues about how the next step should be made are to be found in the very work of some of the pioneers of the Public Choice movement.

It may sound surprising to many but that was precisely the domain of Vincent and Elinor Ostrom's initial work. The Ostroms dealt with Public Administration not figuratively, in between the lines and by default, as many other public choicers do, but literally. During the initial decades of Public Choice, the Bloomington scholars were the main promoters of the Public Choice revolution in the field of Public Administration. Moreover, they were at the very core of that field, outliers, but not eccentrics. In the '60s and '70s their work was in many respects defined by a systematic attempt not only to introduce Public Choice insights into the discipline dealing with the study of the administrative side of public affairs but, even more, to revolutionize this field, to incite a "paradigm shift" towards the Public Choice foundational principles.

If that is the case, it looks like revisiting the contours of the Bloomington School's place and contributions in the context of the applied field of Public Administration is of great interest in more than one way. This paper is an attempt to deal with some of the challenges emerging from that task and it has several main objectives: first, to outline briefly the nature of Public Administration as a field, with a view to better understand its inherent link with Public Choice and why in order to gain policy relevance, Public Choice needs to systematically engage it. Clarifying this point will give an enhanced sense of the meaning and context of the Ostroms' work in this respect: an attempt to promote the Public Choice perspective in Public Administration, and the Public Administration perspective in Public Choice. Second, to take a closer look at the nature, significance and reception of Ostroms' work in the field of Public Administration and to substantiate the claim that the Ostroms were the main advocates of Public Choice in Public Administration studies and that they were recognized as such by the field. The evidence is overwhelming and the fact that this essential side of their contribution seems largely to be neglected today requires some explanation. Third, to take note of the reception of the Ostroms' Public Administration perspective in the context of Public Choice—or more precisely, of its fiasco. Last but not least, to look at what could be said about the limits of the standard Public Choice approach, when seen from the viewpoint of the Ostroms and what the insights gained from that perspective may mean to us today.

In brief, this paper revisits the Public Administration roots and facets of the Bloomington School of Public Choice and Institutional Theory and in doing that, it reopens the discussion of the Public Administration angle in Public Choice, now that the normative and applied dimension seems to be an emerging frontier for its research agenda. This exercise may offer a good starting point for a discussion of how contemporary Public Choice may continue to advance its applied agenda using as a vehicle the roads opened by the Ostroms.

2 Public administration: the field and its setting

It looks like the precondition of making operational Steven Brams's call for going "from theory to practice" and of the strategy to "translate research findings into actions" is to

recognize that between the analytical insights of the Public Choice research program and their application in public policy, lays an entire intermediate domain of decisive importance. Both analytically and institutionally, the distinction between the domain of public policy and the domain of Public Administration is compelling. The two are intrinsically related, yet they are different in practice. That difference and its practical implications are not always recognized by researchers usually tempted to think about the applied side directly in terms of public policy. That is an increasingly likely attitude especially since the field of Public Policy Studies has been institutionalized in academia in the last decades, obscuring even more the domain of Public Administration. Yet, a brief overview will show not only why Public Choice scholars interested in practical applications should not make this error but also recognize the inherent link between Public Choice and Public Administration. In doing that, the pivotal position the Ostroms' work holds in this respect will emerge naturally.

The notion of "Public Administration" evokes inevitably the idea of the institutionalization of public or collective action: the organization and management of men and resources in governance. It is about the technology of human cooperation taking place through various arrangements of social coordination, cooperation, command, monitoring and control. There are in fact two usages of the term, related but ultimately different: the first is of an activity, a specific form of social cooperation to materialize in the real-life organization and management of people and resources. Usually (and in this article) that field designated as "public administration". The second is of a discipline, an area of study and inquiry, an academic and public discourse domain that explores both positively and normatively the processes, organizations and institutional arrangements associated with the activity of Public Administration. Usually (and in this article) that gets designated as "Public Administration".

In defining both the discipline and the activity, further elaboration is necessary. Both the concept of "administration" and of "public" come packed with a set of questions and with significant theoretical baggage. For our purposes, it is important to note two themes. First, when it comes to the idea of "administration", the most important and sensitive element is the dividing line between "politics" and "administration". In what measure is that separation possible? How large and how relevant (theoretically and practically) is the overlapping grey area? How do we conceptualize it? What are the practical ways of implementing the separation? When is it advisable to insist on this separation and when is it not? How much politics does have to entertain in practice when engaging in Public Administration projects? Second, when it comes to "the public" the issue, again, is one of delimitation: what is "public" and what is "private"? What are the demarcation criteria? How could we delineate the proper sphere of collective, common affairs? How do we make the conceptual criteria operational in practice? What is the relationship between public and private administration?

As is becoming clearer, the same two themes may be identified at the foundations of the very idea of Public Choice as a discipline or domain of inquiry. The "public" in the name of both fields requires systematic and ongoing demarcation efforts, not only at the level of principles but also in case by case investigative situations. In a similar way, the tension between, on the one hand, strategic rationality in political behavior, with its stratagems and spoils, and, on the other hand, the rule-guided behavior implied by bureaucracy and constitutional arrangements, is an inherent foundational feature of Public Choice. Such foundational similarity between the two intellectual domains cannot be an accident. It reveals something deep about their nature, something structural that obliges us to consider them as related, united by an underlying logic.

That being said, and moving past deep conceptual and foundational issues, it is important to note that the practice or activity of Public Administration existed long before the full awareness of its existence has made it an abstract theme and an object of systematic inquiry. Civilization and government administration, writes Dwight Waldo, one of the most influential Public Administration scholars in the twentieth century, “have had a close, mutually stimulating and supporting relationship”. In fact, “most of the six thousand years of what we regard as the history of civilization, governmental administration and not private or business administration has been center stage”. This is “the First Fact about government administration, the proper foundation for a science, an art, a craft, a technology, a theory, an ethic, or a philosophy of government administration” (Waldo 1981; Waldo in Brown and Stillman II 1986, pp. 160–166).

The emergence of self-awareness and scientific theorizing in this respect was focused on the hierarchical, command-and-control bureaucratic aspects of public organization and coincided with the gradual emergence of larger and larger and more and more complex administrative systems associated, first, with the modern state and its apparatus and then, with the parallel developments in the business and corporate world, starting with the nineteenth century. The bureaucratic or administrative or managerial revolutions, both in practice and in thinking, have led to the advent of two related fields (Public Administration and Business Administration) and to their consolidation as academic disciplines. Hence, one of the best ways by which we can get a clearer sense of the nature of Public Administration as a discipline is to consider it in parallel with Business Administration. Evoking or using the better known and more successful one (Business Administration) as a foil, is one of the most effective ways of introducing the second and getting a general sense of its nature: The same mixture of theory and practice, the same interdisciplinarity using opportunisticly results and instruments form different disciplines, the same portfolio of subfields that are organized around core functions of management and governance (such as personnel, finance, budgetary control, motivation).

Given the fact that an administrative apparatus is essential to government and a defining characteristic of governance and given its crucial position in modern societies, the question that arises naturally is why such a limited recognition and visibility in the discussion of public affairs for the field dedicated specifically to this apparatus? Public Choice scholars may be excused for their neglect of Public Administration. In this they share the company of most other social scientists. Why do we tend to always think about public affairs in the terms dictated by Political Science or the Economics of Public Policy, when in fact most of the practice-relevant ideas emerging in these disciplines pivot on the very assumption of the existence of an at least partially functional system of Public Administration? Why, for instance, has Political Science “paid essentially no attention to the historical development of administrative technology, despite its close relationship to the development of government; and little attention to contemporary public administration, despite its impressive magnitude and manifest importance”? To treat political theory as being opposed to government theory is “prejudicial and misleading”, wrote Waldo, and it is “rather similar to the study of anatomy without physiology or physiology without anatomy”. And yet that seemed precisely to be what happened. This question posed by Waldo (in Brown and Stillman II 1986, pp. 166–167) puzzled Public Administration scholars for a long time. Taking a closer look at how Dwight Waldo, a friend, collaborator and critic of Vincent Ostrom, tried to deal with it, offers us an additional angle in our attempt to get a clearer sense of the nature and relevance of Public Administration and by implication, of the Ostroms’ work.

Part of the answer, explained Waldo, must be found in the accidents of history. From its inception, Political Science was fascinated by and paid “more attention to the Greek literature of politics than to the Roman experience of government and its consequences for the contemporary world”. The Greeks “brought ‘the political’ to self-awareness, and their concepts, values, and theories became the basis of Western political thought”. But “city-states (as against ancient empires) required relatively little administration” and in them administration was regarded as part-time or short-term, honorific and amateur. To that, one may add “the propensity of the Romans, to whom much administration owes a debt, toward the practical rather than the philosophical”. It is true that they created an administrative apparatus governing an empire extending over three continents, yet “while they ‘rationalized’ it in law, they did not ‘philosophize’ about it”. All of these considerations were decisive for much that followed. “There are weighty tomes that treat the development of political theory through two and a half millennia without so much as a mention of administration”. In fact, “language, terminology, is indicative: political theory, not government theory; political is derived from the Greek ‘polis’, government from the Latin ‘gubernare’ ”. The political “reached self-awareness with the Greeks” while administration “did not reach self-awareness until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries”. Governments had always had corps of functionaries and even training “schools” for them, nonetheless “only within the last century has the idea of administration as such arisen” (Waldo 1981; Waldo in Brown and Stillman II 1986, pp. 166–167).

The rise of the field was thus long, delayed and took place in the midst of a disciplinary milieu (Political Science) that from its inception had a structural bias against the core elements defining the phenomenon of Public Administration. The break from Political Science took place only in the twentieth century and came to full fruition in the 1970s, a final stage in a process of self-awareness and independent institutionalization. The context of its emergence required carving an identity and a territory in stiff competition not only with Political Science (see the discussion of the distinction between politics and administration) and with Business Administration (see the discussion of the distinction between public and private) but also with an aggressive start-up, Public Policy Studies, breaking apart as an independent, autonomous field announcing an agenda of even further specialization in the intellectual division of labor, with a strict focus on specific policy issues, areas, processes and techniques. That was precisely the moment when Vincent and Elinor Ostrom came to the fore in advancing the Public Choice perspective. It is only when seen in this broader picture, that we could appreciate the real dimensions and significance of their research agenda for Public Administration.

Vincent Ostrom advanced to the new, old field going through, by that time, an identity crisis of growth, a possible solution with two facets. The first was a purely theoretical and methodological one and its content is pretty straightforward, though radical and controversial: practitioners and students of Public Administration have to rethink and reconstruct the theory underlying their field. The conceptual framework pivoting on bureaucratization theory they adopted at its inception as an academic discipline, led to a theoretical crisis and a practical dead-end. Vincent Ostrom offered an alternative: Public Choice. Public Choice should be in fact the foundational theoretical framework for Public Administration. In its belated emergence to self-awareness and disciplinary institutionalization, Public Administration should incorporate without hesitation the new “no name field” emerging within the confines of modern economics. The accidents of disciplinary and intellectual history should be disregarded. The proper foundation of Public Administration is in Public Choice theory. The proper operational basis of Public Choice is Public Administration.

Fashioning the architecture for a system of democratic administration will require different concepts and different solutions from those that can be derived from Wilson, Goodnow, W. F. Willoughby, White, and Gulick. Instead, a new theory of democratic administration will have to be fashioned from the works of Hamilton, Madison, Tocqueville, Dewey, Lindblom, Buchanan, Tullock, Olson, William Niskanen, and many others.... The theory of externalities, commons, and public goods; the logic of collective action and public enterprise; the concepts of public service industries; and fiscal federalism will have prominent places in that theory (Ostrom 2008 [1973], p. 114).

The second was a normative vision. Vincent Ostrom saw Public Choice as strongly connected to the intellectual tradition that had inspired in Hamilton and Madison the radical idea that societies of men may be capable of establishing good government by reflection and choice (Ostrom 1997, 1999, 2008). For him, the analytical core of Public Choice encapsulated two more layers: a pure normative vision about the good society and good government and a series of constitutional, political and administrative solutions for its implementation. In addition to all that, Ostrom was also hinting at an implicit narrative of the evolution of human (self)governance in which it is presumed that, at one point in history, a certain type of political system and its associated constitutional system, create the conditions for the emergence of a new form of Public Administration: “democratic administration”. This special variety of administration is structurally different from the traditional, better known, bureaucratic administration (Ostrom 2008 [1973], p. 114).

From the very beginning, Public Administration scholars recognized that, normatively speaking, what Ostrom calls “democratic administration” is part of a special formula of social organization, defined by fragmentation of authority and overlapping jurisdictions within a set of constitutional limits “that sharply curtails public actions by promoting alternative, private nonprofit, or local options for collective action” (Stillman II 1999, p. 189). As opposed to the bureaucratization command-and-control hierarchy-centered vision, the Ostromian perspective “puts a premium on competition, pluralism, open choices, and constitutional alternative modes of collective action that maximize personal liberties” (Stillman II 1999, p. 189). In such a system, the normative focal point will not be “preoccupied with simplicity, neatness, and symmetry but with diversity, variety, and responsiveness to the preferences of constituents”. Attention will shift from bureaucratic command-and-control structures to “the opportunities individuals can pursue in multi-organizational environments”. Last but not least, policy analysis will become more a form of comparative institutional assessment concentrating on “problems of institutional weakness and failure inherent in any organizational structure or institutional arrangement” and hence on “the opportunity costs inherent in different organizational arrangements” (Ostrom 2008 [1973], p. 114; Ostrom 2008).

The radicalness, profundity and magnitude of Ostrom’s proposition could hardly be exaggerated. To make things even more interesting and difficult to dismiss on grounds of improper radicalism, in the new Ostromian perspective, the traditional Public Administration theory, with its focus on bureaucracies and hierarchies, is not negated or abolished. It is simply relegated to be a subdivision, a part of a broader and more general theoretical and normative perspective. The new relationship was supposed to be one between a general theory of social order and governance and a particular theory, relevant for certain domains and historical moments. In brief, seen from the Public Choice standpoint, the Ostromian rendition of Public Choice in Public Administration is thus not mere advocacy of an analytical method, of the application of a mode of reasoning to areas to which it hasn’t

applied before. It is a vehicle for a vision of social order and governance, an essential ingredient of the “science and art of association”.

3 Public administration and the Ostroms

The fact that the challenge posed by the Ostroms' work to the field of Public Administration was recognized as such by the field itself is not at all difficult to document. It is true that for a while, starting sometime in the 1980s the contributors to the field exhibited some uneasiness with their work and its implications and legacy. Yet, the 2005 John Gaus Award conferred annually by the Public Administration Society “to honor the recipient's lifetime of exemplary scholarship in the joint tradition of political science and public administration” went to Vincent Ostrom, marking a new era of rapprochement. “In a lifetime of exemplary scholarship”, states the letter nominating him, “Professor Ostrom has challenged and changed our understanding of American politics and administration involving metropolitan and municipal government, resource management, and educational policy, as well as federalism and constitutional analysis”. In the 1950s, “he achieved intellectual breakthroughs in the study and practice of water resource management and educational administration”. In the 1960s, “he made us think differently about metropolitan organization and public administration, while being at the same time editor in chief of the leading journal in the profession, *Public Administration Review*”. In the 1970s “he offered novel interpretations of federalism and constitutional choice, serving also as co-founder and president of the Public Choice Society. The books and articles he wrote during this period - many translated in other languages - continue to be cited and used” (Public Administration Section Newsletter 3 2005; Ostrom et al. 1961, 1988).

Vincent Ostrom's role as a pivotal figure both as a participant in the initial Public Choice conferences, when Public Choice hadn't settled yet on an official name, and as its key promoter of the theory's use in Public Administration, has also been recognized and reemphasized in a recent article published in *Public Administration Review*, the flagship journal of the field, by Theo Toonen, a leading Public Administration scholar of the current generation. Toonen is fond of reminding readers how in 1964, as an editor of *Public Administration Review*, Vincent Ostrom urged from the very beginning scholars “keep in touch with any newly emerging no-name fields that may represent important and exciting developments for the advancement of public administration” (Ostrom 1964, pp. 62–63). The Ostromian Public Choice episode is now solidly entrenched in the history of the discipline.

The role the Ostroms played at the interface between Public Administration and Public Choice theory is very well captured in *Public Choice Theory in Public Administration: An Annotated Bibliography* by Nicholas Lovrich and Max Neiman, published in 1984, with a foreword by Robert Golembiewski. The book's attempt to take stock of the developments at the interface is especially relevant for this discussion. It is a comprehensive assessment based on a systematic bibliographical review of the first two decades of the Public Choice intrusion into Public Administration, an assessment done precisely at the critical moment when the gap between the Public Administration mainstream and the Ostroms was beginning to widen. The book starts by noting that “public choice represents a new and rapidly growing influence in public administration”. Few graduate programs and textbooks in Public Administration existed then “that do not include analytical and normative public choice approaches” and “it is quite safe to assume that there are precious few public administration instructors who have not read Vincent Ostrom's exposition of public choice

theory in *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration* (1973)". Moreover, "it is likewise a safe speculation that many such instructors and students have studied the exchange of views by Ostrom -in advocacy- and Golembiewski -in criticism- in the American Political Science Review [1977] an exchange by two eminent scholars which has done much to promote professional interest in this topic" (Lovrich and Neiman 1984, p. xxii).

Lovrich and Neiman's collection of 200 abstracts of relevant works is divided into two main groups: normative studies dealing with "the desirability of public choice orientations toward the proper design and operation of governmental-programs and agencies" and empirical studies. Vincent and Elinor Ostrom's contributions (as well as those of their collaborators) are represented heavily in both categories, Elinor's more in the empirical section; Vincent's more in the normative one. As in the case of many other literature reviews, the Ostroms' work is perceived both from the perspective of the big paradigmatic push it advocated and from the perspective of the various Public Administration subfields and issue areas to the study of which they contributed: intergovernmental relations (federalism and polycentricism), co-production and provision of collective goods, public finance, measurement and evaluation, natural resources management, public-private governance arrangements, metropolitan administration and public sector more generally.

Commenting on the spread of the influence of the Public Choice approach beyond the confines of academia, Lovrich and Neiman point to the same Vincent Ostrom. In a moment when successful politicians and their appointees "promised new, innovative approaches" entailing "less regulation, lower taxes, more localized administration" and "a greater reliance upon both the private sector and volunteerism among the citizens", all "found a comprehensive rationale in the works of public choice theorists". Thus "it is no accident of course, that Vincent Ostrom and a number of his associates were invited to formulate a plan for the reform of California governmental institutions by Ronald Reagan, then governor of the Golden State" (Lovrich and Neiman 1984, pp. xxii–xxiii).

The Ostroms' sustained Public Choice offensive is recognized as such over years, in a set of works reviewing and introducing the field, although the key paradigmatic challenge they advanced is not always noted. For instance, in Lynn and Wildawsky's (1990), *Public Administration—The State of the Discipline*, Ostromian Public Choice is used as the typical example of approach using objectivist assumptions and taking a political and structural perspective. (As such, it is occupying the fourth quadrant in a two-axes matrix, subjective-objective and political-organizational). The authors refer to Thiebout's theory to explain that Public Choice "emphasis on a consumer perspective in decision making on the supply of services" (Ibid, p. 233); comment rather inaccurately that "Ostrom's Democratic Administration sees bureaucracy as an absolute evil" (Ibid, p. 146), and highlight a remark the Ostroms' influence on public budgeting analysis. In this respect, they note, Public Choice "provides a clearly demarcated theoretical reference point and philosophical criterion against which both budgets processes and policies may be set" while it "on the normative level sets up standards for design of systems of fiscal decision making, legitimizing decentralization and the decoupling of service provision and service delivery" (Lynn and Wildawsky 1990, p. 246).

A better grounded view is to be found in *The Public Administration Theory Primer: Essentials of Public Policy and Administration*, by Frederickson et al. (2012). The book introduces rational choice as both the new orthodoxy and as an ongoing "challenge to the prescriptive arguments taken from traditional public administration scholarship", explaining that some of rational choice's theory advocates argue that "it should be adopted as the core paradigm of the discipline". That is to say that "these advocates present rational

choice not simply as an economic framework that can be adopted to help understand bureaucratic behavior and the production of public services but also as a normative, democratic theory of administration in its own right". With that, Frederickson et al. manage to pinpoint a major distinctive feature of the Ostromian approach to Public Choice and Public Administration. As we have seen, for Vincent Ostrom, Public Choice is indeed not merely an analytical method, but the foundation of a fully normative political economy vision, a public organization paradigm, not a simple instrument among others in the toolkit of the social scientist or practitioner. "The most forceful and best-known articulation of this argument, explain the authors, comes from Vincent Ostrom in his book *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration* (1973). Ostrom argued that rational choice could not only provide an intellectual lifeboat but also provide the discipline with its theoretical ship of state". The authors note that Ostros' Public Choice democratic theory of administration is an alternative to the bureaucratic and hierarchy theory, then dominant, but points to a tradition that goes back to Madison and the Federalist.

Similar remarks could be found in *Preface To Public Administration: A Search For Themes And Direction* by Stillman II (1999). "The most popular, widely discussed, and controversial public administration scholarly treatise in the 1970s", he writes, "was probably Vincent Ostrom's *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration* (1973) that frontally assaulted the Wilson–Weber paradigm while proposing a replacement paradigm, which he called democratic administration" (Stillman II 1999, p. 142). Stillman thinks that the democratic administration paradigm attracted broad interest "because of its forceful attacks on traditional normative state-building and state-maintenance doctrines within twentieth-century public administration" and contributed to and rode on the revival wave of Jeffersonian republicanism, grass-roots democracy, and the enthusiasm for a stateless society ideal. "The state dissolved as a recognizable entity in the Ostromian schema of 'public choice' (which in reality was 'private choice') where radical individualism replaced the state as the focal, point for decision making". Yet, in the end, the impact was mixed and somewhat ironic. By the mid-1970s, many agreed with Ostrom's assessment of "an intellectual crisis" in Public Administration (both as an intellectual field and as a practical activity) and found his diagnosis convincing. However, "few in public administration swallowed wholesale his prescription of 'public choice' " (Stillman II 1999, p. 143).

In brief, Vincent Ostrom (and latter Elinor) introduced a bold, radical and well recognized Public Choice perspective to the field of Public Administration. Yet, 50 years after the first advances, despite the interest and recognition those efforts have received, assessing their overall impact is an exercise riddled with ambiguities. In his recent *Public Administration Review* reassessment of the work of Elinor and Vincent Ostrom from a Public Administration perspective, Toonen (2010) synthesizes elegantly the evolutions. Toonen notes "a somewhat distant and at times strained relationship with American public administration as an institutional field of teaching and research". Thus, "in the United States, *The Intellectual Crisis* marked the beginning of a period in which the Ostros were estranged from large parts of the establishment of the public administration discipline". He conjectures that the interdisciplinary nature of the Ostros' work, as well as their eagerness to incorporate (or abandon) new theoretical and methodological ideas if those development proved to be not very productive, may have something to do with the uneasiness of the relationship. The fast pace at which they were moving didn't fit well with the overall trajectory of the discipline. At the same time, Toonen also acknowledges that it was the tone of the Ostromian stance that raised some ideologically driven reactions: "In many cases, the consolidation reforms were supported by liberal political forces and by

many traditional public administration researchers searching to improve deteriorated regions and neighborhoods”. This context “gave the no-nonsense research attitude of the Ostroms an inadvertent but sustained ideological undertone”. The fact that large parts of the American Public Administration community “seemed to take *The Intellectual Crisis* more or less personally” did not help either (Toonen 2010, p. 197).

We are thus at the roots of a paradoxical situation. Although the “reinventing government” of the ‘90 and the new “public management” or new “public governance” movement of recent vintage seem to be a natural extension of the pioneering ideas promoted in Public Administration by the Ostroms starting with the 60, their work is rarely quoted by the leaders on the new wave. Lynn (2006), a major promoter of the new public management or new public governance movement, barely recognizes the ground-breaking relevance of Ostroms contributions for the very developments he advocates. Thus, as Toonen (1998, p. 232) notes, “Ostroms’ approach and normative vision has materialized more in European than in American context”. That had a price, as in US, “reinventing government”, an initiative that reflects an Ostromian propensity for “fragmentation, checks and balances, self-organizing and self-governing networks, competition for services and differentiation of demand”, looks like “only to have scratched the surface, whereas in the European context, various state systems went through fundamental changes, all amounting to a more differentiated, pluralistic and decentralized operation of government and public administration”.

To sum up, we have seen how a brief overview of the field of Public Administration in its disciplinary and historical evolution context gives us a better sense of its intrinsic relationship with the Public Choice program as well as of the crucial position it has for any attempt to move Public Choice from purely theoretical and academic research to practice. It also offers a clearer insight of the inroads created by the Ostroms in this respect. However the overview leaves us with a series of questions that are far from having a mere historical relevance. Why didn’t the Ostroms’ Public Choice have more success in Public Administration? Even if one may protest the use of the notion of failure, it is rather clear that their success was not unqualified but more a matter of interpretation. What should contemporary Public Choice scholars interested in the policy and its applied side learn to avoid (or to do), from the Ostroms’ experience of relative failure or relative success? Is there something consequential to learn from that? Those are important questions to ponder.

That being said, it is also important to recall that the Ostroms’ work does not represent only an attempt to advance Public Choice in Public Administration. It may as well be seen as an attempt to advance Public Administration in Public Choice. Hence, it is evident that one may ask the same question in reverse: why hasn’t the Ostroms’ Public Administration approach been more successful in Public Choice? Is there something to learn from that?

4 Public choice and the Ostroms

When it comes to the reception of the Public Choice perspective by the field of Public Administration, it is easy to document the recognition given by the field itself to the significance and magnitude of the Ostroms’ effort. Assessing the overall success and failure is indeed a matter of criteria and their interpretation. Yet, it is undeniable that Public Administration scholars at least understood what the Ostroms were about. Interestingly enough, that seems not to be the case when it comes to the reception of the Public Administration perspective within the Public Choice program. It looks like the relevance and even the existence of the domain of Public Administration (both as an already

established field and as a social phenomenon in itself) where barely noticed and even less understood in their unity.

That makes even more relevant the kind of problems Steven Brams identified in his 2006 Presidential Address to the Public Choice Society. Taking seriously the Public Administration perspective would have meant inducing from the very beginning a different orientation to the evolution of the Public Choice program. If that was feasible or even desirable may be a matter of discussion. Yet one thing is clear: if one makes the applied level the starting and focal point, then the theoretical and empirical research efforts become an instrument for a problem and practice-driven approach, focused on specific governance problems and dilemmas, as seen and interpreted through an explicitly articulated and explicitly assumed normative framework. That is fundamentally different from an approach that starts with a “positive social science” ideal and remains to the end in the confines of its underlying logic that relegates the applied concerns to a mere follow-up phase, a different enterprise in the intellectual division of labor, constantly praised but never taken seriously. One could easily see in all of this the roots of the current predicament, as described by Brams: a long series of efforts at analytical and empirical analyses for their own sake that, when it comes to their normative and practical relevance, “never tire of finding fault with a policy or program but do not propose constructive alternatives” (Brams 2006, p. 246). So the connection between the symptom and its root cause is easily to establish, albeit indirectly and evoking a counterfactual argument.

That being said, while the diagnosis is relatively uncomplicated and undemanding, the cure is less so. Based on everything said before, it looks like a real breakthrough on the applied front requires as a precondition a mental shift. It is shift from a concentration on theoretical puzzles and empirical generalizations (imagined more or less under the vague epistemological shadow of the notion of “covering law”) to the preoccupation with institutional design and governance problems in a particular domain, pivoting on the Public Administration apparatus and its concrete operations. It may be a matter of debate if this is anything else other than a “paradigm shift”. For our discussion, it is sufficient to note that the Ostroms’ Public Administration challenge to Public Choice entails a radical change of perspectives and mirrors their Public Choice approach to Public Administration. Both entail comparable foundational challenges that may well be labeled as “paradigm shifts” (Ostrom and Ostrom 2004; Ostrom 1998).

But this is only part of the story. The Ostroms themselves advanced their own assessment of the theoretical and analytical facet of the Public Choice program. A general sense of alienation resulted out of it, spreading among many of their associates and followers. In a remarkable piece on Vincent Ostrom and the legacy of his work, written by McGinnis and Ostrom (2012) for *Public Administration Review*, one can find some thought-provoking clues regarding the theoretical reasons behind this attitude. An entire section of the paper is dedicated to Vincent Ostrom’s concerns with the direction of the field, and explains his departures from the mainstream of Public Choice scholarship. It is worthwhile reviewing it. The authors note that Vincent Ostrom was eager to associate his work with the term “public choice” before “the term took on more specific connotations”, but then he took strong exception “to many components of the public choice tradition as it subsequently developed”. The main points of their compiled list of issues in contention are revealing a complex and thought-provoking picture (McGinnis and Ostrom 2012, pp. 20–21).

First, Vincent Ostrom was “skeptical of claims that a single model of rational behavior is valid for all individuals in all institutional contexts”. If one wants to understand decision making in non-market settings, why should one rely exclusively on the assumption that

individuals “decide on the provision, production, and allocation of public goods using exactly the same decision-making processes they would use when exchanging private goods in a market setting?” (McGinnis and Ostrom 2012, p. 20). It may be the case that they use the same processes. But this is something to be investigated not postulated, something to be established, not assumed. With that, Vincent Ostrom was signaling a direction that is currently materialized with Smith’s (2009) “ecological rationality” perspective or, Gigerenzer’s (2008) research on heuristics and decision making.

Second, Vincent Ostrom was reluctant to embrace the analytical homogenization strategies very popular in what has become mainstream Public Choice. For instance, he was “critical of the utilitarian approach to defining social welfare functions, in which individual utility levels were supposedly aggregated to represent the goals of some collective group” and especially their use as “the standard against which actual processes typically are compared” (McGinnis and Ostrom 2012, p. 19). Similarly, he had serious reservations regarding the excessive and leveling use of efficiency in public policy. One of the benefits of polycentric systems of governance advocated by Vincent Ostrom, explain McGinnis and Ostrom, is their capacity to capture economies of scale. Yet, Vincent Ostrom never assumed that this is or should be the only goal under consideration. It may be the case that “in a polycentric order, individuals or communities might decide, for whatever reason, to sacrifice efficiency for the pursuit of other goals, such as accountability, fairness, or physical sustainability” (McGinnis and Ostrom 2012, p. 20).

Third, Vincent Ostrom took very seriously entrepreneurship as a phenomenon, as an explanatory variable and as a normative factor. That, as we know, is always a problem in the context of a hard-core, rational choice perspective. Crafting the institutional setting, the action arena within which interactions and exchanges can take place, he wrote, requires acts of institutional entrepreneurship. Public entrepreneurs are “artisans who creatively craft the institutional arrangements within which they live and act”. Therefore, “institutional analysts must learn to appreciate the skill associated with the establishment and the operation of institutional procedures”. An important corollary is that a “public enterprise system” coexists with a “private enterprise system”, mutually reinforcing one another. Both are fueled by entrepreneurship, but entrepreneurial actions take different forms in the two different settings (McGinnis and Ostrom 2012, p. 20).

Fourth, an approach that recognizes the importance of the entrepreneurial imagination, of the heterogeneity of individuals’ preferences and of the diversity of institutional performance criteria, has to be an approach that recognizes the importance of belief systems, framing effects and causal and normative ideas: “no institution can be fully understood without taking into account the ways in which the participants themselves conceptualize the nature of their interaction”. Vincent Ostrom was convinced of the crucial importance of the epistemic, cognitive and knowledge processes for institutional order and change, up to the point where he coined the term “epistemic choice” to draw attention to the fact that most “public choice” phenomena are at least in part choices over images, ideas, expectations and arguments. It is important to understand the role of deliberations, negotiations and strategizing regarding the rules of the game and their application, as well as the criteria and procedures used in those respects. Ultimately, conclude McGinnis and Ostrom (2012, p. 20), Vincent Ostrom “did not approve of the direction in which the public choice movement developed”. He was unhappy with its self-inflicted reductionism and constantly “reminded public choice scholars of the critical importance of ideas and of the complex and ever-changing patterns of compromise that is public administration”.

But as significant as these theoretical and methodological points are, it is the normative dimension that is crucial and, in the end, one has to return to it. Even assuming that real or

imaginary theoretical and methodological deficiencies were corrected (and, in fact, current Public Choice research is methodically incorporating most of these ideas), that doesn't guarantee a successful shift towards the applied policy frontier. Few elements in the list above signal an escape from the current predicament. However, when the normative side is taken into account in its own terms, things change.

Steve Brams' Presidential Address encourages efforts "to propose and to try to implement reforms that we deem desirable". The key in reading his call should be on "we deem desirable". Where is that desirability coming from? Based on what? Whether one likes it or not, or is prepared or not, we are entering here into deep normative territory. Desirability comes from an underlying vision. Any systematic effort to offer practical alternatives has to be rooted in a normative vision. One has a choice: to articulate that vision and try to strengthen it with feasibility and consistency arguments or leave it implicit and tacit.

Even if one shuns a big normative vision, and claims interest in only limited, specific suggestions regarding particular public policy cases and situations, sooner or later one will discover that a policy problem leads to a Public Administration problem. A Public Administration problem leads to political system issues. In turn, the political system's issues have inescapable constitutional level ramifications. In brief, the institutional structures of governance come embedded in such complex networks of formal and informal relationships. That is to say, Vincent Ostrom's normative political economy, in which "democratic administration" is intertwined with a certain type of political and constitutional order, is not an act of intellectual whim or an accident. It is the result of simply following this logic of interdependence to its conclusion. Sooner or later, to adopt a policy stance means to tacitly operate with a systemic view and to embrace a series of normative principles that go beyond the particular level or issue we may try to address in isolation. Like it or not, this is part and parcel of taking seriously the applied level and the policy ambitions Steven Brams was talking about.

That being said, it is important to note that currently the dominant strategy adopted when it comes to the challenge of the normative dimension takes a different spin. So far, many Public Choice scholars tried to avoid this challenge by adopting tacitly an intermediate strategy: a critical stance, positioning as critics of the status quo but without a clear commitment to an alternative. Thus write McGinnis and Ostrom (2012, p. 20), "Public Choice came to be associated with a deeply skeptical view of government" and remained limited to this initial attitude. Brams noted that, too, when he described the efforts that "never tire of finding fault with a policy or program but do not propose constructive alternatives" (Brams 2006, p. 246).

Normatively speaking, skepticism is the cheap and easy version of having a normative position without making any serious effort. It is one way of circumventing the efforts to sort out (a) what the normative ideal and its principles are, (b) the institutional formula to materialize the ideal, (c) the feasibility analysis of the institutional formulae advanced and (d) the contextual implementation strategies. Indeed, mounting a skeptical stance seems optimal in several respects. Not only does it require less intellectual efforts but it also generates fewer vulnerabilities. The anxiety caused by the potential vulnerability of exposing a normative construction that may be criticized and even labeled as ideological (a terrible and nasty word in social scientific circles) or the anxiety caused by the potential vulnerability of being considered a transgressor of the "positive science" and "value free science" taboos and dogmas, seem to play a surprisingly important role in the field. An ironic situation especially given James Buchanan's explicit and repeated warning that,

economics itself, the mother discipline, is an enterprise operating “between predictive science and moral philosophy” (Buchanan 2000, pp. 1–2).

5 Conclusions

After revisiting the Ostroms’ work at the boundary between the domains of Public Choice and Public Administration we are left with a clearer understanding of the nature and significance of their effort as well as with a more realistic assessment of its success and impact. Indeed, impressive as it is in its impact and recognition, in the light of all of the above, the Ostroms’ achievement seems to be far from capturing the real potential of their ambitious project. To fully understand why that is the case requires a separate discussion in itself, and this paper has only sketched the beginnings of that discussion.

The other major theme of the paper is the crucial relevance of Public Administration for the Public Choice (applied) agenda. The relationship between the two seems to be somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, they seem to be connected intimately. Yet, at the same time, it seems that it is not easy to join the two in practice and even in theory. The Ostroms’ effort itself offers in this respect at best a mixed result. Based on the record of their experience, it is safe to conclude that moving Public Choice in a policy/Public Administration direction faces very serious, non-trivial challenges. Developing a systematic, consistent applied research agenda requires a shift of approach of magnitudes that may be considered paradigmatic. The very identity of the field would be in question. Applying economic reasoning to non-market settings is different from a policy-oriented, applied-solutions-to-governance-puzzles approach.

But the essential point is that it would be a mistake to see this entire potential paradigm shift as a matter of pure vision or pure theoretical imagination and will. This is a case in which the institutional structures, the incentive systems and the beliefs and ideas behind research agendas are interacting, creating a specific setting that encourages some developments and discourages others. The relationship between, on the one hand, the structure and content of the beliefs, ideas and research priorities of an epistemic community and, on the other hand, the institutional architecture within which that epistemic community operates, matters a lot. The reality is that Public Choice as a research program and an epistemic community has emerged from economics and continues to operate in institutional, epistemic and organizational parameters framed on those of the mother field, with all its norms and incentives. In an ironic way, this is an issue ideally suited for institutional and Public Choice analysis. The main question is: how could institutional change take place so as to align better the practices of the scholarly community with the vision advanced by those who favor a public policy, applied level, engagement for the field?

In an even more ironic way, beyond the various possible levels of sophisticated institutional analysis rests a simple issue of basic Public Choice, as articulated a long time ago by Gordon Tullock, in his *The Organization of Inquiry*. Tullock (1966, pp. 12, 20–29) and Caldwell (2008) built his argument around an analysis of the reasons why people engage in scientific inquiry. He proposed a three point list. First, simple curiosity, the need to understand. This leads to pure research. Second, the desire to control. This leads to applied research. The applied researchers’ incentive is given by the benefits coming from analysis of practical applications. Third is “induced curiosity,” the deliberated use of monetary rewards to get scientists to investigate specific problems, which arises because many academics ...

...do research and produce articles simply because this is the way they earn their living. They may actually have very little interest in the subject of their investigations and will abandon their researches without a single pang of regret if they are offered a better paying job doing something else. (Tullock 1966, p. 29)

Tullock acknowledges that the categories are ideal types, that the motivation of most real-life researchers is mixed. But the bottom line is that we may be able to analyze any scientific organization or research program using as a vehicle the three motives that drive scientific inquiry. The key is that each motivation requires different institutional arrangements to incentivize and induce productive research directions. Hence, incentive alignment is the key. It may not be a sufficient condition, but it is definitely a necessary one. The implication of our discussion is obvious: to move things in the public policy/Public Administration direction mentioned by Brams and initially advanced by the Ostroms, one has to think in terms of different incentive alignments within a different institutional design. In brief, at a minimum, “a system designed to induce curiosity” in applied issues. How such a system may look like and in what measure it may be feasible in the current concrete circumstances, is not a mere theoretical and academic problem. In a yet another ironic twist, it is a fascinating applied problem in itself: the issue of the policy dimension of Public Choice seen as an applied institutional, epistemic and Public Choice analysis and design issue.

To sum up, revisiting the Ostroms’ work at the boundary between Public Choice and Public Administration, not only helps us to get a better sense of the context and nature of a major aspect of their intellectual endeavors, but also to understand the challenges entailed in attempts to advance the applied and policy facet of Public Choice. We come to understand that the limited progress in this respect may be the result not of personal, accidental and purely intellectual factors but of institutional and structural ones; that, in fact, we are confronted with a genuine institutional and Public Choice problem. And thus, at a second look, we come to realize that this is one of the problems that could be approached and addressed as an institutional and epistemic choice case, through the very institutional analysis frameworks and instruments developed by the Bloomington scholars. This insight may be considered to be one of the significant legacies of the Ostroms and, at the same time, a challenge to all of us.

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