

The State of Social Equity in American Public Administration

BY H. GEORGE FREDERICKSON

Over the years, public administrators have contributed much in helping to create a more equitable, fairer, and more just America. Yet we have much more to contribute. As a core value in public administration, social equity is no longer novel or new. Nevertheless, during the past thirty years, as social equity has grown in importance in public administration, there is an irony: Americans have become less equal in virtually all aspects of social, economic, and political life. In our literature, in our classrooms, and in our administrative practices we have learned to talk the social equity talk. But if the data on the growing gap between the haves and have-nots in American are any clue, we are not walking the social equity talk. In this essay, I attempt to describe the changing terrain of public administration and sketch the challenges administrators face as they navigate both the theory and the reality of that terrain. Finally, I offer some suggestions for walking the social equity talk in the years ahead.

The Evolution of Social Equity in American Public Administration

In his seminal essay of almost a century ago, “General Principles of Management,” Henri Fayol listed equity as one of fourteen general principles. His description of equity was entirely internal, having to do with equitable or fair treatment of employees. Fayol put it this way: “Desire for equity and equality of treatment are aspirations to be taken into account in dealing with employees. In order to satisfy these requirements as much as possible without neglecting any principles of losing sight of the general interest, the head of the business must frequently summon up his highest faculties. He should strive to instill a sense of equity throughout all levels of the scalar chain” (p. 58).

Though claiming equity to be a primary principle of management, Fayol did not consider the details of how to achieve equity in the context of the “scalar chain,” or hierarchy, which contains such obvious inequalities as difference in pay, authority, and responsibility. Furthermore, because his founding essay had primarily to do with business organization, Fayol did not wrestle with the unique public administration challenges of equity in public policy or service delivery. Except for an essay by Woodrow Wilson, none of the other founding documents consider what we now call social equity in public administration.

Wilson pointed out that it is “harder to run a constitution than to frame one” and claimed that “administration lies outside the proper sphere of politics”; nevertheless, he describes a form of public administration social equity. Consider these words from his founding essay, “The Study of Administration”: “The ideal for us is a civil service cultured and self-sufficient enough to act with sense and vigor, and yet so intimately connected with the popular thought, by means of elections and constant public counsel, as to find arbitrariness or class spirit quite out of the question” (p. 24).

Aside from these glancing blows, and the more considered treatment of justice in the early literature, for the first several generations of the field of public administration it was simply assumed that good administration of government was equally good for everyone. It was during the 1960s that it became increasingly evident that the results of governmental policy and the work of public administrators implementing those policies were much better for some citizens than for others. Issues of racial and class inequality and injustice were everywhere evident

and the subject of open anger, indignation, outrage, and passion. Riots in the streets over racial injustice and an unpopular war tend to concentrate the mind. It was in this state of concentration that the phrase *social equity* entered the literature and later the practices of public administration. Certainly there had always been concern for fairness in the better practices of public administration, but it was not until the 1960s that the phrase *social equity* became a feature of public administration with an attendant set of concepts and a cluster of shared values.

In a brief and summary form, the initial elements of the concept of social equity are found in the claim that justice, fairness, and equality have everything to do with public administration. First, laws do not carry out themselves; implementation is our work. As one of the early leaders of our field wrote, “public administration is the law in action.” Second, if public administrators implement the law, can we not bring the law simply and precisely to life as it is written? No, we cannot. The law is seldom so clear, so precise, or so evident that it can uniformly be applied from case to case to case. Third, in the early years of our field it was written that public administration should be neutral implementation of law and policy. We know that this is not strictly possible. Public administration is the law in action and involves, indeed requires, interpretation of that law and discretion in its application. Fourth, our public institutions are the setting in which our elected leaders, working in our system of democratic self-government, struggle with issues of fairness, justice, and equality. But because public administrators are responsible for carrying out the laws and policies, we too have important struggles with fairness, justice, and equality. As a nation, we are not as fair, as just or equal, as we should be. Public administrators cannot say that these problems belong only to lawmakers.

In the early stages of the development of social equity in public administration, it was assumed that other academic fields or disciplines and other bodies

of professional practice were also developing and embracing self-aware concepts of social equity. We now know that this was not the case. Only in recent years have other fields, disciplines, and bodies of professional practice stepped up to consideration of social equity.

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So it could be said that, at least with respect to social equity, public administration has led the way.

In the early years of applying concepts of social equity to public administration, emphasis was on issues of race and gender in employment, democratic participation, and service delivery. Efficient and economical management of government agencies characterizes the ethics that guided much early reasoning in American public administration. The logic of those ethics allowed public administrators to assume that the effects of good management, efficiency, and economy would be evenly and fairly distributed among our citizens. Gradually, however, public administration began to acknowledge that many public programs were implemented much more efficiently and effectively for some citizens than for others. Indeed, public administrators could not logically claim to be without responsibility for some practices that resulted in obvious unfairness and injustice, so an argument emerged for social equity as an added ethic in public administration. Eventually, social equity took its place along with efficiency and economy as the “third pillar” of public administration. Indeed, by the late 1990s these words were in Shafritz and Russell’s standard text:

“The ethical and equitable treatment of citizens by administrators is at the forefront of concerns in public agencies. Reinforced by changing public attitudes, the reinventing government movement and civil rights laws, the new public administration has triumphed after a quarter century. Now it is unthinkable (as well as illegal), for example, to deny someone welfare benefits because of their race or a job opportunity because of their sex. Social equity today does not have to be so much fought for by young radicals as administered by managers of all ages” (p. 436).

Over the years the phrase *social equality* has come to encompass the many complex issues associated with fairness, justice, and equality in public administration. Shafritz and Russell list three qualities of social equity:

First is the obligation to administer the laws they work under in a fair manner. It is hard to believe today that this first obligation was once controversial.

The second way of interpreting obligations to advance social equity is to feel bound to proactively further the cause—to seek to hire and advance a varied workforce. The attitude requires a specific approach: It is not enough to go out and find qualified minorities. You must go out, find them, and then qualify them. This is why the U.S. armed forces have been so much more successful in their affirmative action efforts than the society as a whole.

Third, government can go only so far in forcing social equity. But there is no limit to the amount of inspiration it can provide to encourage people to do the right, decent, and honorable thing. This encouragement has a name. It is called moral leadership. [pp. 436–437]

Over the years both the subject of social equity and its language have changed. Equity is now more broadly defined to include not just race and gender but ethnicity, sexual preference, certain mental and

physical conditions, language, and variations in economic circumstances. The words *multiculturalism* and *diversity* are now often used to suggest this broader definition of social equity.

There is little doubt that inequality in America would be worse were it not for public administrators dedicated to social equity in their practice, but there is no question that the broader context of American politics has tilted the playing field toward the privileged and away from the underprivileged, making contemporary commitment on the part of public administrators to social equity particularly difficult.

Some Examples of the Widening Social Equity Gap

The growing acceptance of social equity in public administration over the past thirty-five years has occurred during a time when the actual status of social equity in America has been in steady decline. Although we have been promoting democracy abroad and even fighting to bring it to others, democracy at home is in trouble. The recent report of the Task Force on Inequality in America of the American Political Science Association puts it this way: “Our country’s ideals of equal citizenship and responsive government may be under growing threat in an era of persistent and rising inequality. Disparities of income, wealth, and access to opportunity are growing more sharply in the United States than in many other nations, and gaps between races and ethnic groups persist. Progress toward realizing American ideals of democracy may have stalled, and in some arenas reversed” (p. 651).

At the time of the emergence of social equity in public administration, racial and gender inequality and discrimination were widespread. But in our time “the scourge of overt discrimination against African Americans and women has been replaced by a more subtle but still potent threat—the growing concentration of the country’s wealth and income in the hands of the few” (p. 651). Rising economic inequality is accompanied by other forms of demo-

cratic privation—highly unequal voices in political affairs and government processes that are much more responsive to the privileged than to other Americans. “Disparities in participation,” the task force goes on to say, “mean that the concerns of lower- or moderate-income Americans, racial and ethnic minorities, and legal immigrants are systematically less likely to be heard by government officials. In contrast, the interests and preferences of the better-off are conveyed with clarity, consistency, and forcefulness” (p. 658). In addition to the gap between the poor and the rest of society, there is a growing gap between privileged professionals, managers, and business owners on the one hand and the middle strata of white, African American, and Latino workers and blue-collar employees on the other. Put bluntly, despite our claimed commitment to social equity, important elements of professional public administration are part of the problem. All of the contemporary social equity research and data seem to indicate that the terrain of social equity has shifted from more-or-less exclusive concentration on the equity issues of minorities to broad consideration of how to achieve social equity in the context of growing disparity between the haves and have-nots, recognizing that minorities constitute a disproportionate percentage of the have-nots.

The APSA task force concludes their report with these words:

The Declaration of Independence promised that all American citizens would enjoy equal political rights. Nearly every generation has returned to this promise and struggled to elevate the performance of American democracy to its high ideals. The promise of American democracy is threatened again. The threat is less overt than the barriers of law or social custom conquered by earlier generations. Today the risk is that rising economic inequality will solidify longstanding disparities in political voice and influence, and perhaps exacerbate such disparities. Our government is becoming less democratic, responsive

mainly to the privileged and not a powerful instrument to correct disadvantages and look out for the majority. If disparities of participation and influence become further entrenched—and if average citizens give up on democratic government—unequal citizenship could take on a life of its own, weakening American democracy for a long time to come. [p. 662]

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—APSA TASK FORCE ON INEQUALITY IN AMERICA

In the manner of political science, the APSA Task Force on Inequality in America report calls for research on matters of social equity and for “the engagement of political science with improving American democracy through scholarship” (p. 661). For two reasons, however, those identified with public administration, either as a field of political science or as a freestanding academic field and body of professional practice, are inclined to a less passive and more engaged approach to the problems of inequality in America. First, the argument that issues of inequality belong to politics and policy and not to public administration must be rejected. Virtually all empirical research in the field indicates that public administration is highly influential in policy making and implementation. Second, as an academic field, a body of research, and a field of professional practice, public administration has always been applied. After all, how can we run the constitution and carry out the laws if we do not get our hands dirty? Because our work tends to be applied, it is not a surprise that public administration wrestled with issues of social equity for thirty years before our political science colleagues looked into it. It is also not a surprise that our political science colleagues have chosen to attempt to improve democracy through scholarship,

a distinctly “clean hands” approach to the subject. This is good. Let political scientists and others keep their hands clean and study in minute detail exactly how unequal America has become. We need their good work. But in public administration, I insist that we engage with the problem of inequality, that we dirty our hands with inequality, that we be outraged, passionate, and determined. In short, I insist that we actually apply social equity in public administration.

Walking the Social Equity Talk

It is easy, of course, to exhort one and all to apply social equity in all aspects of public administration. But how should it be done?

First, like our environmental friends, when it comes to social equity we should think globally and act locally. Indeed I argue that all important matters of social equity are local, in the sense of consequences. The results of national policies are all manifest locally, in our neighborhoods, our families, our cities and our work places.

Many of the elements of inequality are influenced by the unique patterns of jurisdictional fragmentation in American metropolitan areas. The concentration of poor African Americans, and to a lesser extent Latinos, in low-income urban areas has had a spiraling effect on inequality as the basic elements of opportunity—access to good schools, jobs, transportation, housing, and safety—have become largely unavailable to residents of these neighborhoods. Large-scale federal government policies such as public housing, transportation, welfare reform, and educational reform have tended either to be ineffective or to exacerbate the problems of inequality. Census data now indicate that poverty is moving into the suburbs and our metropolitan areas are becoming more geographically diverse. Public administrators at the local level are increasingly in a position to either influence policies or implement already established policies in a way that ameliorates some of the effects of poverty and opens opportunities. Metropolitan migration is so pronounced that the

us-versus-them patterns of an inner city and its suburbs is giving way to “us and us” patterns of similarity between inner cities and suburbs. Like-minded public administration professionals should be working together on their collective social equity issues because it is increasingly evident that few jurisdictions can claim to be isolated from the consequences of poverty and inequality.

Second, it is time for everyone in public administration to be engaged in the war of ideas. We are, as Weir explains, still citizens: “Ceding the ideological terrain to antigovernmental messages like ‘the era of big government is over’ is not good enough in a polity in which simple media messages are not counterbalanced by organizational politics. In fact, simple antigovernmentalism amounts to endorsing unchecked inequality. A strong, big message about how government is ‘on your side’ or is ‘here to help you’ is essential to counteract antigovernment messages” (p. 680). Americans may be philosophical conservatives, but they are programmatic liberals, in the sense of support for rural electrification, environmental protection, Medicare, Social Security, and so forth. The problem is that simple defense of the programmatic status quo is defensive and bereft of new ideas. It is time for public administrators of all kinds to relentlessly ask the so-called second question. The first question is whether an existing or proposed public program is effective or good. The second question is more important: For whom is this program effective or good? Answer any class-warfare charge immediately with the understanding that the second question can be deferred if it can be demonstrated that a program is universally good. If that doesn’t work, try this retort: “You say that I am practicing class warfare. Nonsense. I am engaged in the war of ideas, and my idea is fair and yours is not. Stop tossing around class-warfare slogans and engage me in the war of ideas.” To effectively engage in the war of ideas requires knowledge, courage, and a quick wit. We public administrators have the knowledge and most of us have a quick wit. But do we have the courage?

Third, it is important to remember that it isn't necessarily good ideas that win the war of ideas. Determination, organization, money, and persistence behind an idea are likely to win the war. Public administrationists know how to organize, and we are determined and persistent. We are natural social equity warriors. We are passionate advocates for policy specialization and we can be equally passionate advocates for fairness in implementing it. Those of us committed to social equity should pick our cause and enlist in the organizations most likely to turn the levers of policy in the direction of fairness and justice.

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Fourth, when public administration is practiced at the street level it employs a form of social equity. As Steven Maynard-Moody and Michael Musheno suggest in their book *Cops, Teachers, Counselors*, social service officers, cops on the beat, and teachers in the classroom all live in a world of scarce resources, limited time, ambiguous expectations, and conflicting rules. To manage their way through these limitations, street-level bureaucrats apply a form of public service delivery and distribution based on what the authors describe as "client worthiness." Client worthiness is based on stories and master narratives that enable street-level workers to affix particular identity to their clients. The day-to-day practices of street-level public servants is all about the search for fairness, equity, and justice. "Fixing and enforcing citizen-client identities forms the premise for street-level workers' judgments," they write:

Their stories reveal how street-level decision making is complexly moral and contingent

rather than narrowly rule-bound and static. Cops, teachers, and counselors first make normative judgments about offenders, kids, and clients and then apply, bend, or ignore rules and procedures to support the moral reasoning. Identity-based normative judgments determine which and how rules, procedures and policies are applied. Morality trumps legality in terms of which rules, procedures, and policies are acted on; who gets what services and who is hassled or arrested; and how rules, procedures and policies are enacted. [p. 155]

Maynard-Moody and Musheno describe street-level bureaucrats as the coal miners of policy: they do the hard, dirty, and dangerous work of the state. Sometimes they get it all wrong, as in examples of racial profiling and police abuse. Still, most of the time and in most street-level settings "small acts of normative improvisation by forgotten streetwise workers sustain the state; they are acts of statecraft on which the institutions of governing depend." (p. 165) When it comes to social equity in action, supervisors, managers, and super grades could take some lessons from street-level bureaucrats.

Fifth, like it or not, senior public administrators and those of us who study public administration are part of the elite, the privileged. In much of our literature and ideology there is a distinctly patronizing tone to social equity. A commitment to social equity obliges us to look after the interests of those who are denied opportunities or are disadvantaged regardless of their competence. At the intermediate and upper levels of public administration, we tend to avoid the uncomfortable issue of competence, although street-level workers have no illusions about competence. I am partial to the blunt words of Lawrence M. Mead on this subject. In an article in *Perspectives on Politics*, he wrote: "To recover democracy, government must assume greater competence in lower-income Americans than the elite finds comfortable. We would rather lay the burden of change on ourselves than on the less fortunate. We believe in our

own abilities; we are less sure about theirs. But, unless some minimal capacities are expected of the less privileged, change becomes unimaginable, and a caste society will emerge” (p. 674).

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—LAWRENCE M. MEAD

There are two interesting lessons on this subject. One is the lesson and life of Mohandas Gandhi, who insisted in collective nonviolent expression of demands for fairness on the part of the least advantaged acting together. Another is the lesson of the Roundheads or Puritans, British citizens below the elite who asserted a belief in the individual, independent of class; insisted on egalitarian politics; and were suspicious of elites in their hierarchical polity. The founding of the United States of America was a denial of aristocracy and the triumph of Roundhead reasoning. In much of social equity there is democratic rhetoric but aristocratic assumptions. We search still for versions of social equity that are truly from the bottom up.

Sixth, it is high time for moral indignation, for passion and anger. The moral high ground, often put passionately as Christian doctrine, has tended toward those interested in issues such as abortion, gay marriage, human cloning, stem-cell research, and euthanasia, and those mobilized in pursuit of these issues have proven to be formidable. Issues of poverty, at least from the biblical Christian perspective, are at least as central to doctrine as are these other issues. But it is far more difficult to bring indignation and passion to matters of poverty. Still, this is what needs to be done. Describing “sinful inequalities,” John DiIulio writes in *Perspectives on Politics*, “Bible-believing Christians are supposed to

heed the call to ‘be not afraid’ of any worldly challenge. . . . Inequality is a moral problem, and [if] you are convinced that it is a real problem in America today, you should not be afraid to say so—and not be afraid to recommend whatever policies or programs you believe might make a real lasting difference. . . . It is liberals, not conservatives, who have normally lacked the courage of their true convictions, some for fear of being accused of favoring ‘big government’ or having other thoughts out of season” (p. 669). Persistent and grinding poverty is a profoundly moral issue, and social equity is part of a moral stance on that issue. But how shall we most effectively put the social equity of public administration in practice?

In addition to applying social equity in our day-to-day public administration work, I suggest that we more broadly engage issues of racial, gender, and ethnic inequality and issues of inequality in economic opportunity, jobs, housing, transportation, and health care. I respect those who are working on social equity indicators, social equity benchmarks, and other forms of statistics, but the prospects of such labor for success seem to me to be limited. Furthermore, statistics and data lack passion and smother indignation. It does the cause of social equity little good to be able to know exactly how poor the poor are.

Instead we should turn to the media most likely to stir an interest in social equity. Think of the statistics regarding the grossly disproportionate percentage of incarcerated African Americans. We know those appalling statistics forward and backward, and it seems to make little difference. Stories, films, videos, essays, and personal descriptions of the ravages of an overly long sentence for a drug offence have the power to move people, and also to move policy makers. Stories, films, and videos of single mothers working two jobs and still falling behind hold some prospect for moving watchers and readers. There is a desperate need to dramatize social equity issues, to bring them to life. I am convinced that if the gener-

al population understood more fully the effects of discrimination and poverty on American lives they would respond by supporting candidates committed to social equity. Through their neighborhoods, churches, and social groups, mobilized citizens who understand poverty and inequality would personally do their part to even up the economic and political playing field.

If politics is all about majority rule—and it is—then public administration should be all about seeing after the interests of minorities and the poor. It seems to me we are long past needing to defend this proposition. It is time to walk the social equity talk.

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H. George Frederickson is the Edwin O. Stene Distinguished Professor of Public Administration at the University of Kansas.

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