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NEW PERSPECTIVES
ON PUBLIC SERVICES
PLACE AND TECHNOLOGY



CHRISTOPHER POLLITT

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Place and Technology

Christopher Pollitt



OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of
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First Edition published in 2012

First published in paperback 2013

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-960383-1

ISBN 978-0-19-967736-8 (pbk.)

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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New Perspectives On Public Services

For Cayba, Rosie, Otto, and Konsta
Each in Their Own Times and Places

Preface

It is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it. The relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled.

(Berger 1972: 7)

This book is written on the bold assumption that there is a hugely important aspect of modern government that most of the professional scholars who write and teach about public policy and management have largely ignored. It is the aspect of 'place' and 'space'. I find very little of this in the standard works on public policy and management (including my own past efforts). In recent years scholarly interest in this 'angle' (which was never great) actually seems to have shrunk. There is a lot of talk about how e-government and the Net have diminished the importance of time and space, as though we do not need to worry about such things any more. Yet (I will argue) place is crucial to both the understanding and the organization of many public programmes, and can also sometimes be a significant influence on citizens' attitudes towards their government(s). To make the point rather crudely, one might say that as citizens we live and work in *places*, not in policies. In John Berger's terms, places are what we *see*, and our explanations for them are never settled or complete. Both theory and evidence support this broad position, as I will attempt to demonstrate in the chapters that follow.

The main focus will be on three inter-related questions. First, how and why does the provision of public services shape places? Second, and conversely, how do the characteristics of particular places influence how public services are organized? Third, how do the locations/sites of public service provision influence citizens' wider attitudes towards, and engagements with, the state? The first question entails a discussion of how we can conceptualize, research, and understand the overall impact that public authorities have on spatial relationships. This is in part, but not entirely,

a question about modalities of action (decisions, policies, routines, techniques). The second, reciprocal question seeks understanding of how the manifold particularities of place act back to influence both the ways in which public policies are formulated and the manner of their implementation. The third addresses the issue of effects on citizens—does it matter to citizens where and how they interact with their public authorities? This set of questions will be explored, and refined, as the book proceeds.

I will come at these questions from a particular angle. My background, training, and interests are mainly in the concrete workings of public service organizations—schools, hospitals, police forces, and so on. So that is where my main focus will lie. I will not be attempting to scale the abstract heights of fashionable contemporary debates about ‘rescaled’ state power and globalization, or ‘the virtual state’ or the ‘network society’, or even ‘governmentality’. But I will most certainly be looking at the effects of some of these grand processes in so far as they are (or are not) visible within the frames of specific organizational, local, and national contexts.

My father was a geographer, and I nearly became one too. As a teenager I studied a subject called ‘political geography’ (although I preferred geomorphology), but then my studies abruptly changed direction and I left geography behind. For many years now I have been a public policy and management academic, and, until recently, I thought mainly about the phases and cycles of the policy process, models of management, and the consequences of using particular organizational structures and technical tools in specific political and cultural contexts. None of this involved much cogitation about space and place. As my work progressed, however, I became more and more suspicious of generic management theory (or of generic democratic theory for that matter). I grew convinced that ‘context’ was often crucial, and that perception has informed many of my publications (e.g. Pollitt 2003a; Pollitt et al. 2004; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009, 2011). Of course, I am only one of many who have in various ways resisted the push for ‘six steps’-type universal ‘solutions’. For me the next stage was to disentangle some of the key elements in that enormously vague-but-useful term ‘context’. The national political system was the first element out of the bag, and that seemed to help one understand a good deal about why reforms went down one trajectory in country A and another in country B (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009, 2011). Then I thought I saw two key elements even further ‘behind the scenes’ and even more protean with respect to context. These were time and place, both of which appeared to be widely ignored in many of the most popular management texts.

So I tackled time first (Pollitt 2008; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009), and now, in this work, I come to place.

Such explorations are frequently fraught with surprises (at least for the traveller), and this one was no exception. I had not got very far with place before I realized that it was also going to be necessary to examine the effects of changing technologies. Technologies of transport and communication play central roles in how places and spaces are shaped. The role of technologies, therefore, features strongly in the book. In recent years public managers have begun to write quite extensively about technology—or at least about e-government—so it is not such a conspicuously neglected topic within the public administration community as is place. Nevertheless, its treatment tends to be rather ghettoized (Pollitt 2011), whereas here I want to connect the issue of technology to mainstream concerns about the placing and organization of public services. None of this, incidentally, is meant to imply that place and technology have unvarying, deterministic effects, or that they outweigh all other influences, or even that it is feasible to construct a general model of how they ‘work’. (I will get on to ‘theory’ in Chapter 2.)

It is scarcely possible to write an academic book without being interrogated about its disciplinary identity. During early discussions of the proposal for this book some geographers said it did not adequately cover modern political geography, and a couple of political scientists said it did not embrace the full range of relevant ideas in contemporary political science. Some public administrationists said time and space sounded interesting, but how was I going to relate them to the debates in their field about governance, innovation, networks, partnerships, public value, post-New Public Management (NPM) (and a few other things)? The gentle reader may by now have guessed my response—that I am going to disappoint each and every one of these questioners. For this book is not intended to survey the state of any discipline, or, indeed, to import one or more disciplines, lock, stock, and barrel, into my own interdisciplinary field of public policy and management. My purpose has been more magpie-like—to carry off attractive and glittering objects from wherever I might find them, and then put them together to see if they could add lustre to my own topic. Not everything fits—and certainly not everything fits with everything else—but the basic approach, though constrained by some general precepts of social science epistemology (epistemological and logical coherence, some kind of correspondence with available empirical evidence), is eclectic. The focus is on the spatial and ‘platial’ dimensions of public service organizations, how these have changed, and how they are

continuing to change. If this interdisciplinary promiscuity generates discomfort among disciplinary guardians, so be it. I comfort myself with the thought that interdisciplinary magpies have played a most honourable and fertile role in the history of my field (and many others). Consider, for example, the amazing range of literatures raided by Charles T. Goodsell, for his half-forgotten, but fascinating, *The Social Meaning of Civic Space* (1988), or the melding of architecture, history, political science, and other things in Paul Hirst's *Space and Power: Politics, War and Architecture* (2005). My biggest regret is that such a broad and eclectic approach, while in important respects appropriate for a foray into only partly charted territory, inevitably means that I treat some fascinating literatures in a 'smash and grab' manner—I do not do justice to their intrinsic complexity or subtlety. At the micro-level, the design of public buildings and 'civic spaces' would be one example, while at the meso-level the evolution of models of spatial planning would be another.

What I hope to offer, at least on my optimistic mornings, is a new way of thinking about public service organizations—more concrete and practical than long analyses of abstract management tools and concepts, and more rooted in the locational specificity of everyday life. One possible ambition would be that most graduate and postgraduate courses in public policy and/or administration would invite their students to pay attention to conceptualizing, theorizing, or even just *noticing* spatial issues. This would be rather a big change from the status quo. During my more pessimistic afternoons I see such aspirations as, though justifiable, nevertheless somewhat pretentious. A more modest goal would perhaps be to convince at least a healthy proportion of the readers of this book that places and technologies are practically important to governments (as they are to citizens), and that we policy and management academics could and should do much more to theorize and investigate them. There is a place for place, one might say, and the study of public management and policy-making has been the poorer for the recent underestimation of this dimension of public life.

Christopher Pollitt

Vanha Rajatie
Pohjankuru
Finland
2011

Acknowledgements

To be trite, all books are to varying degrees collective efforts, not excluding those that have only one nominal author.

First on my list of those to thank is undoubtedly my research assistant at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven in 2009–2010, Liesbeth op De Beeck. Although it was her first job in research, she was always quick and efficient, and usually succeeded in hiding her astonishment at some of my working habits. She found lots of good stuff that I would probably never have found myself. I am also indebted—not for the first time—to two outstanding secretaries: Anneke Heylen and Inge Vermeulen.

Second, I want to express my continuing gratitude to a group of friends and colleagues who have often suffered my pestering with questions and drafts in the past, and must surely hope that this is my last book. They include Geert Bouckaert (Leuven), John Clarke (Open University), John Halligan (Canberra), Steve Harrison (Manchester), Ed Page (LSE), Peter Roberts (Darlington Borough Council), Colin Talbot (Manchester), and Roger Wettenhall (Canberra). In addition to these hardened advisers, my research on Canberra and Brasília benefited enormously from the apparently limitless generosity of a number of denizens, especially Helen Moore and Alastair Greig (Australian National University), Frederico de Holanda and Brasilmar Ferreira Nunes (University of Brasília), and Evelyn Levy (World Bank, Brasília). These kind and tremendously well-informed individuals made my time in those places socially enjoyable as well as intellectually stimulating. Others who have helped with particular requests include Christina Andrews (University of São Paulo), David Flannery (University of Canberra), Peter Humphreys (formerly of the Irish Institute of Public Administration), John Mohan (University of Southampton), and Tom Pollitt.

Third, this book also draws on the Brighton Leuven project, the first stage of which was described and reported in Pollitt and Bouckaert (2009: see especially pp. 195–7). During that project I received immense help from

many managers and clinicians at the Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals Trust (see Chapter 6) and from senior officers in the Sussex Constabulary, the National Police Improvement Agency, and elsewhere (see Chapter 8). Despite the relentless pressures of life at or near the top of their respective organizations, more than thirty individuals willingly gave time to be interviewed—in some cases more than once. Add another fifty, subsequently interviewed for the Time, Place and Task (TPT) project on which much of this book is based, and you will appreciate why I cannot list all my creditors here.

Fourth, I am grateful to four anonymous reviewers of the first version of a proposal for this book. I did not like some of their observations, but they imposed necessary clarity on certain matters, and, in one way or another, I have endeavoured to accommodate most of their suggestions. As usual, it was the least welcome comments that demanded the closest attention.

Fifth, I would like to express my deep appreciation of the honour that Katholieke Universiteit Leuven did me by awarding me a BOF/ZAP research professorship in 2006. The ensuing period—free to do my own research in an ancient university in a beautiful city—has been profoundly satisfying.

Sixth, and finally, I am running out of novel ways to acknowledge the huge and unceasing contribution made by my wife, Hilikka Summa-Pollitt. By words, thoughts, and deeds she quietly improves me and my writings, though she never, ever, exhibits that special moral fervour that can so easily make ‘improvers’ objectionable.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations specific to this research

GAP	government as placemaker
TPT	Technology, Place, and Task

See the Appendix to this volume for more information on the research and for details of all TPT interviews.

Other abbreviations and acronyms

ACPO	Association of Chief Police Officers
ACT	Australian Commonwealth Territory
AHA	Area Health Authority
ANPR	automatic number plate recognition
BCU	Basic Command Unit
CCTV	closed circuit television
CSI	crime scene investigation
DIG	Decentralization Implementation Group
DRG	Deputy Registrar General
GLC	Greater London Council
GP	general practitioner
GRO	General Register Office
HMIC	HM Inspectorate of Constabulary
ICT	information and communications technology
NCDC	National Capital Development Commission
NFLMS	National Firearms Licensing Managing System
NHS	National Health Service
NPIA	National Policing Improvement Agency
NPM	New Public Management
NPT	Neighbourhood Policing Team
NSW	New South Wales
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OGC	Office of Government Commerce
PCT	Primary Care Trust

PIC	Personal Identity Code
PT	Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party)
PNC	Police National Computer
RSCH	Royal Sussex County Hospital
SIS	Schengen Information System
SOCA	Serious Organized Crime Agency
SOCO	Scene of Crime Officer
TPT	Technology, Place, and Task
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization
VFM	value for money
VISOR	Violent and Sexual Offenders Register

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1

Introduction: Where Is the Government?

The state contains two dualities: it is place and persons and center and territory.

(Mann 1993: 56)

An understanding of public space is imperative for understanding the public sphere.

(Low and Smith 2006: 6)

The key innovation and decision-making processes take place in face-to-face contacts, and they still require a shared space of places, well-connected through its articulation to the space of flows.

(Castells 2010: p. xxxvi)

1.1 Where Was It, and How Has It Moved?

Many of us have enjoyed summer holidays visiting those idyllic central and southern French villages. As the morning sun beats down and we amble across the village square in search of croissants and morning coffee, or the cheap local wine, there can be little doubt about where the government is. It is in the *mairie* (town hall), the most formal and impressive building in town, standing there right next to the church and the post office. Similarly, in the very different circumstances of northern English industrial towns, we can hardly fail to notice the magnificent Victorian town hall (Manchester, Leeds, Bradford, and others). In both France and England these are not just temporary containers for actors in the ephemeral dramas of party politics; they are permanent and prominent symbols of a continuing state. In some other countries it is not