

*Critical Issues
in
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ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM AND ADMINISTRATIVE SELF-REFERENCE

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of 'reform' is extremely attractive for the social analysts. Its definition, however, is not equally easy to derive, as it is the case for the concept of the other extreme, the concept of 'revolution' (von Krockow, 1976; Greiffenhagen, 1978; Böhret, 1983).

The inclusion of 'reform' in the political vocabulary has created a lot of confusion, because it was proceeded by the entrapment of the concept within the dominant evaluative bi-pole 'conservatism' versus 'progress'. The debate has been reduced to whether a 'reform' can be in general 'conservative' or 'progressive' and consequently, the discussion on the results of specific reforms has been downgraded. The fact that certain political parties have been characterised as 'reformative' is very indicative of the political semantics that the concept of 'reform' has vested (Narr, Scheer and Spöri, 1976; Hennis, 1977).

In search of a more concrete definition of the concept of 'reform' in the more specific area of 'administrative reform', one can find a multitude of definitions and descriptions which already constitute a separate scientific branch in the field of the science of Administration. We will cite some of these definitions in order to demonstrate their extremely weak analytical potential. Thus 'Reform' can be defined as a change corresponding to a specific social demand deriving from the functional shortcoming of an institution.

Since 'reform' aims at the maintenance of the social status quo, it is a slow and continuous procedure: its final goal being the linking of the 'new' with the 'old' (von Krockow, 1976).

Reform is being characterised by the 'principle of perfection', since it always seeks the constant amelioration of the object under reformation. Therefore, reform is being perceived as something undoubtedly 'good' and whenever something is ineffective and dysfunctional it can be corrected if it gets 'reformed'.

Such a wide range of conceptual definitions of 'reform', however, can not easily correspond to the modifications of an administrative system. Bearing in mind that there are constant modifications and shifts in an administrative system, one may put the question: 'Which of these changes can be considered as reformative?' (Caiden, 1969; Schnur, 1970).

A criterion of selection which is being suggested is the size of the change which a reform in question achieves. In other words, a reform which actually manages to change primordial rules of attitude is a real one and not merely a simple internal change (Schnur, 1970). However, this very reform substantially contributing to the smooth operation of a specific organization might prove disastrous, if it were to be transposed into another one. It is also possible, that a reform acting positively on one element of the certain administrative system (i.e. on a department or a direction) can act negatively on another. Therefore, not only is there no guarantee of amelioration through reforms but it is also possible to reach through them the exactly opposite result. So, despite the fact that it seems that reform can not be expressed by a uniform conceptual definition and it can only be given an empirical, ad hoc definition, the theory of administrative reform has dealt only slightly with this subject.

What is usually being examined, is, whether the agent of the administrative reform -the legislator, the jurist, the politician- covers the prerequisites for the implementation of the reform or, whether, there is resistance against it without a parallel examination of the very concept of reform beyond the framework we have already set above. Political scientists, for example, do not consider Public Administration as an autonomous social system, but as a PAS (political-administrative-system); on the other hand, jurists tend to shrink administrative reform into the mere amendment of some articles of the legal code of Public Administration (Sidentopf, 1979).

Even the poor results of the efforts made through the OECD technical assistance programs during the 1960's and 70's were not convincing enough for the specialists and did not serve as a starting point of reflection for them in order to try to deal with the very concept of 'reform'. A very characteristic example of such an evolution is Greece; while the country presents a development during the '60s, mainly due to the fixed formulas of the OECD, in the two following decades of the '70s and the '80s, it shows recessive tendencies which, however, reflect the actual Greek reality of intra-administrative development.

There are, of course, isolated voices rising higher and higher, claiming that it is urgent that each administrative system should set its own 'internal' definition of 'reform'.

However, in order for another perception of reform to exist, there has to be an utterly different all-embracing conception which must be free of the partiality of either the normative and axiomatic spirit or the empirical one which run throughout the sciences of law, politics and administration. Such an approach - the most comprehensive for all I know- is undertaken by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1964, 1965(a), 1965(b), 1966(a), 1966(b)) in the version of social systems theory that he has developed.

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AS A SELF-REFERENTIAL SYSTEM

According to his basic position, society is composed of an aggregate of autonomous self-referential systems which are all interdependent. These systems are composed of communicative meanings of the actions performed by the social actors pertaining to them.

Therefore, there are no meanings independent of the system or constant in time, nor is there any kind of hierarchy amongst them. There is only the rationalism of the (scientific) system, the justice of the (legal) system, etc. The way the partial meanings interconnect within the system depends on the decision of the system itself which is in correlation to the degree of its self-reference. In this case, we have the notion of the 'operational closure' developed mainly by Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela (Varela, Maturana and Uribe, 1974; Varela, 1984).

We should underline here that precondition for the existence of a self-referential system is the identification of its particularity vis-à-vis the other social systems. Luhmann

here rests with the doctrine of the English mathematician and philosopher George Spencer Brown (1972), who identifies the Difference of a system from the others as the core for the primordial formation of its self-reference. This initial Difference consists in a dual code (positive-negative) which through a process of re-entry serves as the structure of the system (Spencer Brown, 1972).

According to the above mentioned, in order to define Administration as a self-referential social system we should identify beforehand its peculiarity.

According to Luhmann (1966(a)), Public Administration stands aside of all the other social sub-systems, because it is the only one producing decisions which have a binding effect for their recipients, that is, for the other social subsystems. A school, for instance, or a bank, are confined in their administrative role by decisions already taken by 'Public Administration' which has been characterised by Luhmann (1983) as "... the Administration par excellence".

However, the notion of decision in this specific case differs from both the mathematical and legal aspects of it. 'Decision', here, is not perceived as the procedure of "internal selection among many options" but as an act of communication (Luhmann, 1978).

So, if a self-referential administrative system is defined as the system producing collective binding decisions, then politics, the personnel and the public which by tradition are considered to be elements of the system, constitute its environment.

Obviously, the relations of the administrative system with its environment are being reflected in its interior, thus creating a 'second environment', as a matter of speaking. We consider as administration only a system of production of collective binding decisions; and this is the most important key-element, because it touches also the issue of administrative reform.

Through the study of the nature of these decisions, one can observe that they have an internal structure which also defines the prerequisites for this decision-taking. Herbert Simon called this prerequisites 'behaviour' and later on 'decision premisses' (Simon, Smithburg and Thompson, 1950). The prerequisites for the decision-making remain unaltered, regardless of the various stimuli of the environment. Their structure is such that it allows them to operate as Norms of judgment for any individual case and they are not suspended even when the expectations accompanying each separate case are eventually defeated. Therefore, these prerequisites for making a decision can only alter through another decision of the system itself. In other words, the administrative system decides on the basis of its own specific code both for its programs and frameworks of its decision-making policies and for each separate case.

Precisely this feature of the self-referential system has direct consequences to the efforts made for its reform. Contrary to what the classic theory sustains, the existence of certain constant and unaltered information concerning the efficiency development, is not sufficient per se; this information should also be comprehensible, it should be able to 'make sense' to the administrative system (Luhmann, 1983).

If this information doesn't make sense for the specific administrative system, then it is absolutely uncertain whether it will be beneficial to this system. In that sense, in order for any administrative reform to be accepted by the administrative system, it must be 'legible' in a way that the system will manage to adjust its already existing structure to it. This, however, is feasible only when the Administration disposes of learning mechanisms, as for example the so called 'reflexive mechanisms', through which it will be able to absorb every new piece of information and reject any redundancy (Luhmann, 1970). Bearing all the previous in mind, we can define administrative reform as a preparation procedure of the Administration aiming at enabling it to be self-adjustable.

TOWARDS AN AUTOPOIETIC THEORY OF ORGANISATIONS

The deriving consequences from such a definition of administrative reform have direct effect on the principles of management and organisational theory. We further point out the most important ones, in reference to the work of Niklas Luhmann 'Ökologie des Nichtwissens' (1992).

- a. Opposing what classic theory sustains, organisations do not constitute systems achieving goals which have been set beforehand, but systems seeking for goals, in particular, within themselves. Their occasional goals are being set depending on the planning they have previously set.
- b. The eventual planning, programming and monitoring are composed of actions occurring within the system. In other words, the system acts after having grasped the reality through the specific means of perception that only the system disposes of. 'Reality' does not define the system's attitude in an 'deterministic' way. In the relevant literature on 'second order cybernetics' (von Foerster, 1981; Glanville, 1988) has often been demonstrated that there exist neither the monocacy of objective reality lying 'out there' nor the irrosion of solipsism: There exist only a co-evolution of systems observing each other.
- c. Organisations constitute non-trivial machines, in other words, machines determining their way of operation according to the output they generate at a precise time. If this output is being altered or transferred at a given instance then, the attitude, the reaction of the organisation is utterly different. Therefore, what is important is not the technology of transformation of the information but the particular attitude of the system's organisation vis-à-vis this information, and this depends, of course, on the degree of self-reference this system disposes of (von Foerster, 1984).
- d. Communication between self-referential/autopoietic systems is achieved through the creation of a network of loose-couplings and not through the formation of fixed functions between vertically hierarchical levels as the classic theory argues (Weick, 1976). This implies the existence of mutual loose and indirect controls, within a network of mutual understandable meanings in the sense of Parsonian 'interpenetrating'.
- e. Planning and control in self-referential organisations do not have the meaning of the a priori prediction but, mostly, of the covering each distance occasionally occurring between reality and professed goals. These proceedings of the system must be conceived as a continuous, ex post corrective effort.

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