Assembling Neoliberalism

Expertise, Practices, Subjects

Edited by

Vaughan Higgins

Wendy Larner

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CHAPTER 2

Neoliberalism and Rule by Experts

Stephen J. Collier

Introduction

In 1973 the American political scientist Vincent Ostrom delivered a series of lectures at the University of Alabama, which he introduced with an ominous reflection on expert rule and rational administration.[1] "Technical capabilities now exist", Ostrom told his audience, "for human beings to choose a fate marking the end of modern civilization as we know it". If the decision to use nuclear weapons was ever taken, it would almost certainly be made by Americans (among others), and it would be carried out with "considerable 'speed and dispatch' and … relatively small expenditures of 'time and effort' in decision making" (Ostrom 2008, 1). This contemporary predicament, he posited, was not the product of limited knowledge, insufficient expertise, or irrational bureaucracy. Instead, it was the result of a triumphant rationality in modern science and administration.

Having summoned this specter of efficiently administered self-destruction, Ostrom addressed his main theme, and the title of his lectures: a crisis in the science of public administration. When he entered the field of public administration before World War II, Ostrom recounted, he

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was impressed by its confidence that "technical solutions were available to public problems". Once political decisions were reached about policy objectives "the translation of these objectives into social realities" was considered to be "a technical problem within the competence of professional administration". But a different mood pervaded in the 1970s. Turning from nuclear war to urban administration in New York City—a one-time model of reform that had become a potent symbol of government dysfunction—Ostrom posited that it was no longer clear whether government based on the precepts of public administration provided a model to be emulated or had, rather, produced "a gargantuan system which is virtually ungovernable". It could not be confidently asserted that "the bodies of knowledge used by those who practice public administration will lead toward an improvement in or an erosion of human welfare" (ibid., 4). The field's "scientific warrantability" (ibid., 2) had been cast into doubt.

Ostrom traced this crisis in governmental rationality to the "insufficiency of the paradigm inherent in the traditional theory" of *bureaucratic administration* that constituted the field's "intellectual mainstream" during the Progressive Era and the New Deal. This theory of bureaucratic administration drew a sharp distinction between facts and values and proposed that while questions of value were political matters subject to democratic decision, questions of fact could be addressed by perfecting the machinery of political administration through hierarchy, centralization, and expert rule. Against this theory of bureaucratic administration, Ostrom championed a theory of *democratic administration* that he found in classic statements of American *liberal* political thought and, revised and supplemented, in contemporary *neoliberal* political economy. This revived liberalism criticized the practical outcomes produced by institutions modelled on the template of Progressive reform. It also took on the normative and political-philosophical grounds of the theory of bureaucratic administration, calling into question the distinction between facts and values, and the de-politicization of expert rule. The theory of democratic administration also proposed an alternative programming of government, in which technical expertise is embedded in "a complex structure of democratic decision-making". Here, Ostrom placed particular emphasis on an enduring topic of his own work: the diverse mechanisms of individual and collective choice at different scales that comprised a system of "polycentric" government, defined not by administrative hierarchy but by multiple, overlapping jurisdictions and diffused sovereignty.

This chapter considers Vincent Ostrom's 1973 lectures, collected and published in the volume *Intellectual Crisis in American Public*

Administration (2008, hereafter, *IC*), as a site for investigating the relationship between neoliberalism and expert rule. Although Ostrom is not among the figures generally associated with neoliberalism, there are good reasons to consider him in this light.[2] He shared with many other prominent exponents of this tradition a concern with how the classic tenets of liberal political thought could be revived and reformulated in the second half of the twentieth century. Beyond that, many positions Ostrom articulated in *Intellectual Crisis* and elsewhere were shared by other American neoliberals: a critique of the political authority of expertise and of the distinction between facts and values, a suspicion of centralization and an interest in alternative forms of decision-making, a political-philosophical criticism of concepts such as "public value" or "social welfare", as well as an exploration of alternative, contractarian conceptions of the value produced by government.[3] In exploring these themes, Ostrom both drew on and contributed to prominent streams of American neoliberal thought, such as the new economics of public goods and the theory of public choice, pioneered by James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock (Ostrom followed Buchanan, Tullock, and William Riker as the fourth President of the Public Choice Society, whose slogans are methodological individualism, rational choice, and politics as exchange). Thus, the interest of Ostrom's *Intellectual Crisis* is not that it advances entirely novel arguments. Rather, it is of interest—and particularly indicative for an assessment of neoliberalism and expert rule—because it explicitly reflects on the relevance of classical liberal political thought for post-war government, and links this reflection to important strands of post-war American neoliberalism.

In examining Ostrom's work, this chapter grapples with conceptual questions about neoliberalism that are central to the present section of this volume. Is neoliberalism, in fact, a form of expertise—a discourse whose authority is based on a claim to technical mastery and objective knowledge? How does technical expertise relate to neoliberal *political* thought? Recent critical scholarship on neoliberalism has provided one set of answers to these questions. This scholarship has argued that neoliberalism is grounded in a purportedly neutral expert economic knowledge that serves as a cover for a radical political project. This view rests on a series of linked arguments. First, critical scholars hold that neoliberals lay claim to expert knowledge about economic reality. Timothy Mitchell (2008, 1119–1120), for example, has referred to "neoliberal economics", which attempts to demonstrate "that the right to private property is the fundamental requirement for economic development" and that poverty is the product of an "overbureaucratized … state". Second, this critical

scholarship argues, by drawing a strict distinction between expert rule and politics—between facts and values—neoliberalism places its policy proposals beyond political dispute and thereby depoliticizes government administration and undermines democracy. As William Davies (2014) puts it, neoliberalism attempts "to replace political judgment with economic evaluation"; its defining feature, he writes, is its "hostility to the ambiguity of political discourse, and a commitment to the explicitness and transparency of quantitative, economic indicators, of which the market price system is the model". Third, this insistence on its own expert neutrality obscures neoliberalism's underlying reality as an intellectual, political, or class project. Mitchell Dean (2014, 153) has thus written of neoliberalism as a "doctrine of double truths" whose public face of economic knowledge masks the activities of a "militant movement". From this perspective, the role of critical scholars is clear: to cast aside neoliberalism's veil of objectivity in order to reveal its political workings.

As the opening paragraphs of this chapter indicate, Ostrom's work brings into focus central themes in American neoliberalism that bear little resemblance to this picture of neoliberalism in recent critical scholarship. Moreover, Ostrom's neoliberalism cannot be characterized as a form of expertise, and it does not seek to ground its authority or legitimacy in access to objective truth. Instead, I will argue, it is best characterized as a form of what Michel Foucault called critical governmental reason, a reflection on how the authority of truth and the legitimate exercise of political power both *ground* and *limit* each other. In conclusion I suggest that this reading of Ostrom points to a task for the critical study of neoliberalism and expert rule that is quite different from the one critical scholars have assigned to themselves. Rather than articulating a critique of expert rule as the exclusive provenance of social theorists who unmask the truth *behind* "neoliberal expertise"—thereby constituting critique as something outside of governmental practice—the analysis developed here suggests an investigation of how critique has shaped the contemporary arts of government.

Liberalism and the Age of Critical Governmental Reason

The present analysis draws on Michel Foucault's lectures of the late 1970s, which ranged over the topics of liberalism and neoliberalism, truth, politics, and critique (Foucault 1997, 2007, 2008). These lectures have been an important point of reference in much recent critical scholarship. Here,

following Andreas Folkers (2016), I pursue a relatively unexplored theme in these lectures by reading Foucault's analysis of liberalism as integrally related to a genealogy of critique. This reading suggests conceptual and genealogical orientations to neoliberalism as a form of critical governmental reason, as well as a set of methodological pointers for investigating it.

As Folkers (2016, 8) has shown, in these lectures Foucault identified the emergence of liberalism as a moment when "the exercise of power and the production of truth" started to "reinforce each other" in new ways. Over the course of his investigation, however, Foucault's analysis of this relationship shifted in a subtle but significant way. Foucault initially examined how eighteenth-century liberalism replaced the juridico-legal object of previous political thought with the figure of population, a "technical-political object of management" that had to be governed based on knowledge of its reality (Foucault 2007, 70). This initial analysis has led many Foucaultian scholars to analyze liberalism and neoliberalism as forms of truth-producing knowledge about the objects of government. But he subsequently added a significant dimension to his analysis. In the crucial 1978 lecture "What Is Critique" Foucault situated liberalism in a tradition of critique that included biblical criticism and the Kantian critique of reason—each concerned in different ways with the grounds of knowledge and the limits to the scope and authority of truth.[4] With the birth of liberalism—and this constitutes liberalism's interest not only for the contemporary arts of government but also for a Foucaultian genealogy of critique—this tradition came to include critique of the relationship between truth and politics. It is in this light that we should understand why liberalism was the central concern in Foucault's investigation of the present "age of critical governmental reason" (Foucault 2008, 12). This connection to critique also allows us to understand Foucault's persistent concern with how, in liberal and neoliberal thought, truth and politics both *ground* and *limit* each other. At times, truth and politics confront each other in opposition—truth as a limit to government, or politics as a limit to the jurisdiction of truth; at times, truth serves as a prop or support that grounds political authority and political actions.

This last point should be underscored, particularly since it is relevant to this volume's broader concern with assemblage theory.[5] Foucault did not suggest that liberalism or neoliberalism could be identified with a single arrangement of truth and politics. Rather he examined how liberal metacritical reflection, in its "polymorphism" and "recurrences" (Foucault 2008, 320), has established diverse relationships between politics and

truth in response to the exigency and contingency of particular problematic situations. At times, liberal thinkers have mobilized claims about the objective, external, or natural truth of the market to support arguments for scaling back or dramatically reforming government. Foucault analyzed this formation of truth and politics in his lectures on classical liberalism, which marshaled the "truth" produced by political economy about the natural laws of society in order to *limit* government (Foucault 2008, 330). At other times liberal thinkers have championed the authority of impartial expertise to ground the legitimacy of an expanded and more interventionist government. This, importantly for the present story, was the position established by American liberalism of the Progressive Era and the New Deal. At still other moments, liberal thinkers have articulated arguments for limiting or rolling back expert rule, not in the name of a natural, objective, knowledge about the truth of the market (as in classical liberalism) but as an argument about the limits of expert knowledge and technical expertise, and about the primacy and irreducibility of individual interests, values, or preferences as the source of value in a democratic polity (e.g., Foucault 2008, 267–316). These arguments may take the form of absolute injunctions against expert rule. But they may also be linked—and this point bears directly on Ostrom's neoliberalism—to a programming of government that aims to accommodate a scaled back and recalibrated form of technical rule with the norms of liberal democracy.

A full elaboration of these themes would require a much longer and more detailed exposition. Here, it bears identifying three elements of Foucault's analytic strategy that will prove particularly helpful in understanding Ostrom's neoliberalism as an episode in the history of critical governmental reason.

- *Crises of governmentality:* First, Foucault identified "crises of the general apparatus of governmentality" as privileged sites for investigating truth and politics (and proclaimed that the history of such crises was the topic of his 1979 lectures (ibid., 68–70)). As we have seen, writing in the early 1970s, Ostrom thought that public administration confronted precisely such a moment of crisis, when the instrumentalities of government had broken down and existing forms of governmental reason had lost their self-evidence. His reflections thus provide an example of how liberalism has functioned as what Foucault referred to as a "consciousness of crisis" (ibid., 69).

- *Fields of adversity:* Second, Foucault was particularly interested in how, amid such moments of crisis, liberal thinkers constitute contemporary difficulties as problems that demand critical reflection and remediation; liberalism thus appears as a form of problem-*making*. Foucault was particularly interested in how liberal thinkers have analyzed existing assumptions, patterns of government, and forms of governmental truth as a "field of adversity" against which alternative propositions about government could be formulated (ibid., 101–114). We will see that this description helpfully describes Ostrom's extensive analysis and criticism of the then-dominant theory of bureaucratic administration, which served for him as a practical and conceptual terrain of opposition.
- *Critique-programming:* Third, Foucault examined how liberal critique was linked to new proposals for governing, a relation he often designated with the term "critique-program". These new forms of programming were not abstract blueprints imposed on reality. Instead—and this point again bears on assemblage theory—they were comprised through the rearrangement of existing practices and instruments of government (knowledge forms, organizational arrangements, techniques of intervention, material and spatial relationships) and through the formulation of new propositions (or the revival and modification of old propositions) about what government is, about the objects of government, about the legitimate forms of government, and about the relationship between politics and the production of truth (ibid., 106, 114). Correspondingly, Ostrom's theory of democratic administration was not an abstract political theory or a utopian dream (of pure competition, individual autonomy, and so on). Rather, it was a practical-conceptual framework that, as he put it, provided "new concepts, different terms, and different postulates" (*IC*, 13) for linking political-philosophical positions to a programming of government.

The remaining sections of this chapter reconstruct Ostrom's *Intellectual Crisis in Public Administration* using Foucault's methodological guideposts.

Ostrom's "Field of Adversity": The Theory of Bureaucratic Administration

The first step of Ostrom's argument was to take stock of what he took to be the dominant paradigm of public administration—the theory of *bureaucratic administration* formulated during the Progressive Era and the New Deal. Ostrom examined this theory by focusing on Woodrow Wilson, the American president and a leading Progressive scholar of public administration. Wilson's approach, Ostrom observed, was rooted in his assessment of the American political system as laid out by the founders of the American republic. Wilson was suspicious of the United States Constitution's complicated system of checks and balances, which dispersed sovereign power among legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government, and among the federalized states. For Wilson, this divided and diffused sovereignty "created impediments to a smooth and harmonious relationship among the various decision structures within the American system of government" (*IC*, 21). At the same time, Wilson was convinced that the diffusion of sovereign power was illusory—it was the "literary theory" or "paper picture" of the American political system (quoted in ibid.). In fact, there was always a single "center of power". The task of a political scientist was to reveal its "real depositories" and "essential machinery". Seeking these out, Wilson discerned a double tendency in American political development: first, *centralization* of sovereign power toward the Federal Government at the expense of states and localities; second, *concentration* of power in the *legislative* branch at the expense of the executive and the judiciary.

Having identified the true center of sovereign power, Wilson formulated proposals for rationalizing public administration. Wilson's premise, shared by many Progressive thinkers, was that a "sharp line of distinction" should be drawn between politics and administration (Wilson quoted in *IC*, 26). Politics involved the delegation of authority from the people to elected representatives and the passage of laws that defined the overall direction of public policy—all prerogatives of sovereign authority. Administration, meanwhile, concerned the "detailed and systematic execution of public law" (*IC*, 26), a task that, in Wilson' view, properly belonged to the executive branch of government. Where politics addressed values and interests, administration addressed technical problems, matters of fact, the proper disposition of means to pursue politically defined ends.

In light of these assumptions, the aim of public administration was to reform and perfect the bureaucratic machinery that would rationally implement policies defined by sovereign authorities. Drawing on the examples of Prussian and Napoleonic bureaucracy, Wilson argued that good administration was characterized by hierarchy and centralization. The key norm to be pursued in administration was efficiency, in the restrictive Weberian sense of *technical* rationality: once goals had been legislatively defined, the role of administration was to achieve them with the "least possible cost of either money or energy" (*IC*, 24). This norm of efficiency suggested a central role for purportedly neutral technical expertise in government, guided not by the particularistic concerns of constituents but by the (techno-administrative) truth. Progressive reformers did not consider this model of hierarchy, centralization, and expert rule to be anti-democratic. Political sovereignty would remain in the hands of the people. But it would be twice delegated. First, the power to define public policy would be delegated to the people's elected representatives. Second, responsibility for implementing policies would be assigned to trained administrators and technical experts who could respond to constantly changing social and economic problems that demanded rapid technical-administrative intervention.

These principles guided reforms that created a massive new edifice of administration and governmental procedure over the first half of the twentieth century, including expert boards, special authorities and administrative districts, and statutes that required administrative decision to be based on expert judgment. Ostrom (and many other neoliberals) constituted these principles—and the rule by experts they were invoked to justify—as a field of adversity, against which he defined an alternative programming of government.

Polycentricity: The Theory of Democratic Administration

As Ostrom documented in his lectures, by the 1960s the theory and practice of bureaucratic administration had been subject to massive internal criticism. Its aspiration to perfect organizational arrangements, he noted, was undermined by studies demonstrating that "human relations" had "more impact than organization" on bureaucratic functioning. Its confidence in rational decision-making was called into question, most radically

by Herbert Simon's theory of bounded rationality (*IC*, 39). But despite these criticisms and the "crisis of confidence" they precipitated, Ostrom claimed, the field's underlying assumptions were undisturbed. The most prominent proposals for reform argued for renewed effort to solve previously formulated problems. To illustrate, Ostrom cited a report of the American Society for Public Administration's Task Force on Society Goals (1970), which declared that "Today's crisis exceeds all historical crises in public administration". Public executives, the Task Force lamented, had "not yet awakened to the fact that they are in charge", that they were "responsible for the operation of our society" (quoted in *IC*, 10). Crisis, in short, was an occasion to redouble efforts to make good on an old promise: the rationalization of centralized administration and expert rule to implement policies in the public interest. From such statements, Ostrom wryly observed, one might conclude that "exuberance for action need not be limited by the fact that men know not what they do …. We rush to meet crises with calls for urgency and fears of impending disaster" (*IC*, 11). Ostrom proposed to proceed in a different direction.

Citing Thomas Kuhn's work on the natural sciences, Ostrom argued that the crisis in public administration should be traced to an "insufficiency of the paradigm inherent in the traditional theory of public administration" (*IC*, 15). What was required was a "radically different formulation", a "different form of basic ABCs". Ostrom found such an alternative by returning to and critically reinterpreting a theory of administration that he found in the *Federalist Papers*, written by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, and in Alexis de Tocqueville's commentaries on American democracy. This theory rested on basic postulates of self-government: all citizens are qualified to participate in public affairs, and the scope of the "power of command" ought to be minimized (*IC*, 85). These normative orientations were embodied, Ostrom contended, in a "system of administration" that had acquired "a stable form which provided an alternative structure for the organization of public administration". In contrast to the Wilsonian model, in this system administration was not "separated from the processes of popular control inherent in democratic politics" (*IC*, 86).

The critical feature of this system of "democratic administration", Ostrom proposed, was the diversity of political scales and decision-making arrangements of which it was comprised—what Ostrom referred to as its *polycentricity*. In some cases, and in relationship to certain governmental problems, Hamilton and Madison acknowledged the need for a delegatory model that centralized power, as in the theory of bureaucratic administra-

tion. But it was "only in certain spheres", Madison had argued, that such centralized power (in the USA this meant power exercised by the Federal Government) could "in the nature of things, be advantageously administered" (quoted in *IC*, 76). In other domains, government could be organized through multiple centers of political authority that coexisted in the American federal and sub-federal systems. All of these units of government held some sovereign authority derived from principles of self-government, whether through elections that delegated power to distant representatives of very large collectivities—such as the US states—or through direct participation in local administration of counties or townships. This polycentric system did not establish a single relationship between citizen and government. Nor did it require permanent assignment of functions and competencies to the various political units that comprised it. Rather, individuals were simultaneously members of multiple political communities, and the distribution of functions was dynamic, in part due to cooperation or competition among units that might include struggles over domains of competency, and in part due to individual or collective choice to participate in one political unit rather than another. Through this distributed model of sovereign authority, Ostrom argued, quoting Tocqueville's commentaries on Madison and Hamilton's governmental design, power was diffused in a "multitude of hands". Ostrom added that "[p]opular political control pervades both the government *and* its administration" (*IC*, 82).

The Wilsonian theory of public administration judged this diffusion of authority—with its ambiguous distribution of responsibilities, its intermingling of politics and administration, and its elaborate checks—to be irrational and inefficient, entailing "costs in delay, open controversy, and complex relationships" (*IC* 93). But in the theory of democratic administration, controversy, delay, and complexity might be positive features of governmental design. This was partly due to familiar arguments about limiting the abuses of government: in a system with institutions of self-government at many levels, people could act as "masters of their own fate by using one system of government to check the usurpations of the other" (*IC*, 76). More fundamentally, such organization better fulfilled the aspirations of a self-constituting and self-governing polity, in which power was not always and everywhere delegated to distant political or expert authorities, but could be exercised directly. Indeed, the exercise of self-government was *itself* taken to be one of the important aims of this system. Here, again, Ostrom turned to Tocqueville, who wrote that "Uniformity or permanence of design, the minute arrangement of details,

and the perfection of administrative system must not be sought for in the United States". Instead, he found "the presence of a power which, if it is somewhat wild, is at least robust, and an existence checkered with accidents, indeed, but full of animation and effort" (quoted in *IC*, 83). This animation and effort was not a mere means to an end but a central aim and achievement of a self-governing polity.

Neoliberal Political Economy

Although Ostrom embraced this model of democratic administration, his *neo*liberalism did not consist of a simple return to original documents and first principles. The American government imagined by the founders was, of course, dramatically different from the reality of American government in the 1970s. During the twentieth century, the Federal Government had become engaged in a vast range of new policy areas: urban policies relating to housing, crime, and zoning; the provision of water, electricity, and gas to households and industry; the regulation of land, water, and natural resources; and so on. Mechanisms of centralized administration and expert control had proliferated, and new targets of technical-administrative management had been defined through novel forms of specialized knowledge: social problems, the national economy, and the "resources" of the biophysical environment. What makes Ostrom's work distinctively neoliberal is his attempt to reformulate classic tenets of (Madisonian and Hamiltonian) liberalism in light of these (then-) contemporary realities.

Ostrom found a toolkit of concepts, analytical techniques, and empirical findings for such reformulation in post-war neoliberal political economy. Ostrom cited a number of major contributors to this tradition, many of them exponents of Chicago School economics and other strands of American neoliberalism: James Buchanan, Ronald Coase, Michel Crozier, Garrett Hardin, William Niskanen, Mancur Olson, Elinor Ostrom, George Stigler, and Gordon Tullock, among others. Ostrom was particularly interested in a new economics of public goods that had developed out of this political economy. It began from particular public goods—whether national defense, the provision of water, electricity, or gas, the control of natural resources, or the provision of housing, welfare, or urban services—and considered *alternate decision-making arrangements* for their production. As we see in a moment, for Ostrom this starting point was of singular importance. In contrast to the theory of bureaucratic administration, it entailed no initial distinction between politics and administration,

or between democracy and expert decision. Nor did it entail any assumptions, a priori, about the size or composition of the political collectivities by which, and for which, particular public goods were produced. Instead it suggested principles for ongoing reformation and reconstruction of a polycentric system of government around matters of common concern.

The new economics of public goods began with individualistic assumptions, both descriptively (even "collective" decisions could be analyzed in terms of choices made by individuals) and normatively (individuals are the best judge of their own preferences, and these preferences are the proper measure of value in a system of self-government). These assumptions provided a framework for defining public goods. In situations in which the costs or benefits of individual choices or actions are borne by others—whether "negative externalities" such as pollution or "positive externalities" such as those produced by education—individualistic choice must give way to some form of collective choice in order to "internalize the externalities" (Ostrom 1991, 140). This internalization of externalities or "spillovers" is itself the production of public goods. For Ostrom, the analytical repertoire of the new economics of public goods—with its now-familiar concepts of externalities, free rider problems, tragedies of the commons, and so on—provided a way to assess the institutional strengths and weaknesses of different possible collective arrangements for managing the spillovers or overflows that pervade a modern polity, and for comparing them with the institutional strengths and weakness of individualistic choice.

The new economics of public goods identified a number of institutional strengths of decision-making arrangements that involved only "the willing consent of those individuals who freely agree or contract with one another to exchange some good or undertake some action" (*IC*, 49)—that is, markets. Among these were competition and the price system as a mechanism for communicating individual preferences, which had both economic and political meaning in a system of self-government. But in a wide range of situations, this body of scholarship found, individualistic choice introduced problems. These included under-supply ("most public goods would not be provided if funds were collected strictly on a voluntary basis"); the depletion of resources through tragedies of the commons ("[u]nrestricted individualistic choice in relation to common property resources or public goods can generate destructive competition so that the greater individual effort, the worse off people become" (*IC*, 51)); the escalation of unaccounted-for social costs; and the exclusion of vulnerable

groups ("individuals in weak economic positions will be forced out" of consumption (*IC*, 57)).

The same analytical-critical procedure was used to assess the strengths and weaknesses of bureaucracy. Some problems of individual choice—such as high transaction costs and free riders—could be addressed through hierarchy and centralization (*IC*, 58–59). But bureaucracy also had significant sources of institutional weakness: its insensitivity to diseconomies of scale; its tendency (analyzed by Gordon Tullock) to distort information and to multiply expenditures on management rather than "outputs"; its inability to adjust to mistakes ("a bureaucratic organization", wrote Michel Crozier, "is an organization that cannot correct its behavior by learning from its errors"); and its tendency to shift costs, whether in the form of poor services or delays, onto users who had little or no input into the quality and character of goods delivered, a tendency that would be felt most acutely by those who were "stuck" with public consumption ("the most impoverished members of a community", Ostrom contended, "are the most exposed to deprivations under these conditions") (all quotes from *IC*, 53–54).

In part, these arguments were directed against the purported advantages previously claimed for bureaucracy in the Wilsonian theory of public administration, most centrally its superior technical efficiency. But they struck equally at the very definition of efficiency—indeed, the very definition of public value—that underpinned the theory of democratic administration. At stake was not merely the delivery of given goods using the least possible resources but the very mechanism for choosing ends, the problem Max Weber referred to as economic rather than technical rationalization. Here, the normative individualism of post-war neoliberal political economy upended rationality assumptions advanced in the theory of bureaucratic administration. For the new economics of public goods, the value of the goods and services that bureaucracies produced could only be found in the values and preferences of individuals who either bore the cost or realized the benefits of these goods. Efficiency in the absence of some way to take such values into account, Ostrom argued, is "without economic meaning" (*IC*, 62). More fundamentally, it was without *political* meaning in a system of self-government. "If public agencies are organized in a way that does not allow for the expression of a diversity of preferences among different communities of people", Ostrom concluded, "then producers of public goods and services will be taking action without information as to the changing preferences of the persons they serve". The very process

of delegation—from citizens to elected representatives, and from elected representatives to officials and experts—called into question the value of the goods that were being delivered, efficiently or not, by bureaucratic administration.

It bears underscoring that the implication neoliberal political economists drew from this evidence of bureaucratic failure was not that public goods should in all cases be provided by markets. Rather, they sought alternatives to bureaucracy and individualistic choice. "If we want to avoid the tragedy of the commons [in market organization] and the pitfalls of bureaucracy", Ostrom proposed, "we are compelled to address other organizational arrangements" (*IC*, 56). In *Intellectual Crisis* Ostrom discussed various alternative forms of "collective enterprise" that might "develop a common-property resource or provide a public good".[6] Such collective enterprise might be organized by a unit of the sub-federal system (a township, county, or state) that, due to its scale, was inherently closer and more accountable to democratic decisions. It might also be organized through one of the innumerable self-constituting, special-purpose entities (e.g., water cooperatives and school boards) that had been formed in the USA around the production of public goods. In contrast to the administrative entities created by Progressive and New Deal reform, Ostrom argued, these self-constituting collective enterprises were not strictly *administrative* in the narrow sense of being concerned only with the technical problem of implementing policies established by political decisions. Rather, they "depend[ed] … upon the development of political mechanisms such as voting, representation, legislation, and adjudication for people to express their interest by signaling agreements or disagreements as the basis for ordering their relationships with each other". For Ostrom these were forms of administration that were "thoroughly imbedded in a complex structure of democratic decision-making" (*IC*, 80).

It was crucial for Ostrom (1991, 51) that the new economics of public goods made no "a priori judgment" about which kind of organization—individualistic choice, bureaucracy, or self-constituting enterprises—should be favored. For a particular public good, the strengths and weaknesses of each decision-making arrangement had to be assessed for its technical efficiency, for its ability to reflect the preferences of those affected (whether positively or negatively) by the production of a particular public good, and for the degree to which it achieved the aims of a self-constituting and self-governing polity.

"The Art of Associating Together"

Ostrom's analysis of alternative decision-making arrangements for the production of public goods brings into focus the convergence that he saw between the (neoliberal) economics of public goods and the (liberal) theory of democratic administration. Ostrom assigned a directly political meaning to the concepts of spillovers and externalities. These concepts marked problematic situations in which individual actions overflowed a calculus of individual cost and benefit, and defined a collectivity linked by matters of common concern. "An inchoate community is formed", he argued, "by the individuals who use or enjoy a common-property resource, or a public good" (*IC*, 56–57). Ostrom found the rough outlines of this idea in John Dewey's definition of a public as something that comes "into being in an effort to control indirect consequences of action which impinge upon persons not directly involved" (*IC*, 190). Building on Dewey's formulation, Ostrom proposed to refer to "events" rather than "actions" to indicate that not only social behavior but also "physical events, such as floods" might bring new collectives into being. Events, Ostrom explained, "occur as sets under conditions such that their boundaries can be defined with more or less precision. Rivers flow in watershed basins, for example. Patterns of social interaction are also differentially distributed in space, and boundaries can generally be defined for them too". These "specifiable boundary conditions" made it possible to "conceptualiz[e] the community of interests that needs to be taken into account in designing alternative institutional arrangements" (*IC*, 56).

This conceptual and normative orientation suggested new "ABCs" for public administration, which Ostrom laid out in the final lecture of *Intellectual Crisis*, titled "The Choice of Alternative Futures". Wilsonian public administration was built on a model of politics that assumed a pre-determined form of political collectivity, created by an original Hobbesian constitutional act of will—a political compact among people that delegated authority to a sovereign power (*IC*, 88–90). Matters of fact entered in only subsequently, once the distribution of political power had been resolved. In Ostrom's alternative model of democratic administration, political collectivities of different sizes and composition continually take shape around problematic situations that are defined not only by human choices, values, and interests but also by matters of fact previously assigned to administration and expert decision. To Madison's comment that it was "only in certain spheres that federal power can, in the nature of

things, be advantageously administered" Ostrom added that "the nature of things" presumably referred to "events of diverse sizes and shapes": the spatial boundaries of a watershed, the "smogosphere" created by a pollution-shed, the structure of resource flows and productive relationships, the reach of a hurricane's devastation. In this view, both the "nature of things" and the decisions of people are present at—and agents in—the constitution of political collectivities.

At the same time, administration could not be understood as a merely technical matter of implementing the decisions reached through democratic choice once disputes over values and interests have been resolved. In Ostrom's reconstruction, public administration was not a machine for producing efficient outcomes that had been defined through a fixed procedure for delegating sovereign authority from the people to representatives, and for delegating administrative power from legislators to officials and experts. Rather, it was an open-ended mechanism of search and experimentation, through which not only the ends but also the very organizational principles of government could be revisited, reconfigured, and renewed.

This new starting point for public administration brings us back to questions posed at the outset of this chapter: What did this alternative conception of government imply for a science of public administration? What kind of truth could it deliver? And what relationship between truth and politics did it suggest? Government would still require engineers, economists, hydrologists, and innumerable other kinds of experts. But the problem for public administration would no longer be to establish a domain of pure facts, pure instrumentality, in which these experts could operate. Rather, on the one hand, technical experts would be present at founding moments of political collectivity, as they would necessarily be involved in understanding the size of matters of common concern and the composition of the collective affected by them. On the other hand, these technical experts would not be alone in administration, but rather would be accompanied by others whose interests, values, preferences, and very participation in the process of self-government were among the "ends" that of administration. The distinct problem of public administration—very different from the problems of technical expertise—was the choice of governmental design that would bring the production of truth, mechanisms for expressing individual preferences, and the exercise of power together in various possible ways. The criteria for this choice would include technical efficiency, but would also and more crucially include questions relating

to the size and composition of collective arrangements: What scale of collective action corresponds to a given event? What political agents should be "included within its decision-making arrangements" (Ostrom 1991, 147)? This new "paradigm" of public administration would be, following Tocqueville, an "art of associating together"—in Ostrom's formulation, a "science of association", a "knowledge of form and reform" (*IC*, 93).

Conclusion: Neoliberalism and the Politics of Expertise

Ostrom's arguments about expert rule and democratic politics do not fit easily with the arguments critical scholars have recently advanced about neoliberalism, described at the outset of this chapter. Rather than proposing to "replace political judgment with economic evaluation" Ostrom sought ways to scale back the authority of experts and to embed technical government in democratic processes. Far from being hostile to "the ambiguity of political discourse"—or committed to "the explicitness and transparency of quantitative, economic indicators"—Ostrom valorized controversy and ambiguity (all quotes from Davies 2014). Most generally, Ostrom did not present his own position as a kind of expertise whose authority rests on truthful knowledge of an objective and unavoidable reality that neutralizes political decisions. Rather, I have argued, his neoliberalism is best understood as a critical governmental reason that examines how truth and politics both ground and limit each other.

If Ostrom's neoliberalism bears little resemblance to the picture painted by critical scholars, it resonates in perhaps surprising ways with arguments about expertise and politics that critical scholars have *themselves* advanced in recent years. For example, we find echoes of Ostrom's work in Ulrich Beck's (1992) theses on risk society: in the present age of second modernity, technology, expertise, and rational administration are not so much the solution to problems as the root of our problems; the present need is for greater and differently conceived democracy rather than more perfect technical government. Ostrom's work prefigured the arguments of Michel Callon et al. (2009) concerning the "double delegation" of sovereign power from the public to legislators and from legislators to experts, who make decisions on the public's behalf, and thereby bypass democratic input. Most strikingly, Ostrom anticipated arguments recently developed by Bruno Latour: *against* a "purification" of expert truth that renders

"ordinary political life impotent" (Latour 2004, 10); *for* a reconstitution of the political collective that does not take for granted how large it is, who is a member, or how it is composed; and *for* a "science of associations", a term that Ostrom borrowed from Tocqueville decades before Latour used that term to describe his own approach.

In pointing to these resonances, I do not mean to hurl the charge of "neoliberalism" at recent social theory as a kind of accusation. Nor—to take things from the other side—do I mean to suggest that where neoliberalism has been uniformly denounced by critical scholars it should now be celebrated because neoliberals and critical scholars share a set of critical concerns (regarding the distinction between facts and values, the displacement of democratic voice by technocratic rule, and so on). Rather, the point is that Ostrom's neoliberalism highlights a significant blind spot in much critical thinking about the recent history of technical democracy, and also points to a promising horizon of inquiry. Much contemporary critical scholarship constitutes as its *own* field of adversity a set of assumptions about truth and politics that closely resemble those of the traditional Wilsonian theory of bureaucratic administration. In doing so, it treats a particular configuration of truth and politics, which arose at a certain moment, was bolstered by certain arguments, and was embodied in certain institutions, to be the unchanging terms of the modern settlement that repeat themselves in place after place and case after case. What is more, it folds a critique of neoliberalism into a critique of *that* theory of truth and politics. Such analyses thus neglect the fact that the critique of the Wilsonian model of bureaucratic administration was a constitutive moment for American neoliberalism. More consequentially, they obscure a crucial dimension of the relationship between truth and politics in contemporary government, one that Foucault glimpsed in his highly preliminary sketch of a genealogy of critique. Perhaps the most interesting dimension of Foucault's analysis is not that he understood liberalism and neoliberalism as forms of critique but rather the way he analyzed critique as a "line of development" in the arts of government (Foucault 1997, 29). Correspondingly, the distinctive significance of the critique Ostrom articulates is that it has been linked up to techniques and organizational forms (from decentralization to participation to multifarious techniques of government through individual choice[7]) that have become central to contemporary governmental practice.

Notes

1. I am grateful for comments by Cameron Brinitzer, Andreas Folkers, Anke Gruendel, and Chris Kelty on earlier drafts of this chapter.
2. Critical scholars have examined a very narrow range of American neoliberal thinkers. The present analysis contributes to expanding the picture of American neoliberalism, and connecting it with broader intellectual developments.
3. For an analysis of these arguments as articulated by other neoliberal thinkers, see Collier (2011).
4. Foucault did not mention liberalism by name in this lecture, but the connection is unmistakable when it is read alongside his 1979 course at the Collège de France.
5. For analyses of neoliberalism and assemblage theory, see Larner (2011) and Higgins and Larner (this volume).
6. Ostrom also explored a second set of alternatives: multi-organizational arrangements—based on cooperation, exchange, competition, contestation, and adjudication—that produced systems of a larger scale.
7. The now-classic treatment of government through individual choice is Rose (1996). I hope to add to Rose's (and other's) account further understanding of the political-philosophical underpinnings of government through calculative choice, but also of the way that techniques of government through calculative choice fit into a broader range of neoliberal governmental designs for both individual and collective decision-making arrangements.

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