The Origins of Woodrow Wilson's
"The Study of Administration"

By Niels Thorsen
University of Copenhagen

Most commentators seem to agree that there was no definite conception of political power in America that would correspond to European ideas of the state. There was neither a sovereign body of decision-makers, a unified structure of command, or a dedicated group of officials ready to implement governmental policy. Political authority itself was believed to rest on a broad and unwieldy concept of popular, majoritarian will. Power itself was supposed to be dispersed among a variety of semiautonomous institutions, checking and balancing each other on a complicated, if not chaotic field, designed to make it difficult for government to infringe upon the rights of individuals and established groups. Thus, politics rather than policy was the name of the game. Politics generally refers to a volatile situation in which several and disparate groups and interests compete for power. Policy, in contrast, refers to a political setting characterized by an orderly agenda, hierarchial structures, predetermined ends, and a rational choice of means appropriate for the achievement of these ends. In itself, the notion of policy contains some of the features that presuppose a form of state reason which is able to distance itself from the realm of politics and particular interests.

The rise of the progressive state is usually seen as the outcome of a struggle to reconcile traditional political institutions with the dynamic economic forces embodied in the modem industrial corporation. One group of historians have argued that the progressive state contained the embryo of the welfare state and should be seen as a political reaction to the social costs that large-scale capitalism imposed upon the population. Other historians have viewed the progressive state as a corporate state, not a result of pressures from below, but the political product of established economic interests. A third group of historians have associated progressivism with the rise of middle-class professional groups who were motivated by psy-
chological anxieties, by moralism of a bygone age supplemented by fear for working class violence, and by a new self-conscious power over a new rational language which aimed at social control and planning. Political scientists have paid special attention to administrative rationality, party realignment, the emergence of new forms of political leadership, and the systemic reorganization of institutions, procedures, and administrative capacities that took place after the turn of the century.

The intellectual origins of the new state have proved difficult to analyze. While it is well-known that the founding members of the Political Science Quarterly were deeply interested in German scholarship on the state, this field of inquiry withered away after the turn of the century as the progressive state in fact began to grow. The general discussion of Wilson's article, "The Study of Administration," seems to exemplify some of these problems of the political and intellectual context in which the policy sciences of the progressive state originated. "The Study of Administration" is usually analyzed, not in terms of its origins, but in terms of the development of management principles within the field of public administration. There has been occasional references to German ideas about administration and to Wilson's own constitutional studies, notably his first work Congressional Government, but no attempt has been made to consider the relationship between Wilson's views on administration and the contemporary debate about the nature of political economy, which was the dominant issue within the academic environment of which Wilson was a part. Although Wilson's economic views have often been seen as a faithful reflection of the homilies of Manchester laissez faire, it is now clear that Wilson's study of economics was far more advanced. Yet, Wilson was never interested in economics for its own sake. His contribution was not to renew the study of economics, but to work out the premises for government which flowed from a new conception of the economy, often referred to as the German historical school of political economy.

Wilson went to Princeton for his college education from 1875 to 1879. He was taught both political economy and political science by Lyman Hotchkiss Atwater, who was fairly well-known representative of the type of professors who dominated the teaching of political economy in American colleges from the middle of the century until the 1890s. These teachers looked upon the economy as a field which revealed the moral constitution of national life. There was a significant distance from English political economists, who had been persistently engaged in the attempt to establish economic theory as an autonomous field of inquiry. Since Adam Smith, most English
economists had looked upon the economy as a self-governing set of relationships that expressed the deep structure of social dynamics. Hence, they claimed that social welfare and the common good were not dependent upon the conscious will or the righteousness of the citizens, but upon their egotism. The foundation for economic science was the maxim "Give me that which I want, and you shall have this which you want," as Adam Smith had written.

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. Nobody but a beggar chooses to depend chiefly upon the benevolence of his fellow-citizens?

In sharp contrast to this view, American economists of the middle of the nineteenth century refused to divorce political economy from common and especially from Christian morality. They were often preoccupied with drawing out the interconnections between moral and economic behavior. The foundation of both spheres of action was seen to inhere in natural laws which were ultimately derived from divine authority. These economists argued that moral behavior, such as may be associated with hard work, frugality, rectitude, honesty, and other republican virtues, supplied the cause not only for individual happiness and its material rewards, but for national prosperity as well. As Donald H. Meyer has concluded, the college economists were concerned to "prove not only that virtues pays but also that the economic order provides a key to understanding the moral universe. Their real aim was not to justify the ambitions of a rising capitalist society but to show that even such a society, with such ambitions, is part of the moral government, that traditional ethical principles are relevant to every economic order."

While this idea of political economy was undoubtedly a welcome sermon for the new capitalists—the Carnegies, the Rockefellers, and their like—it depended upon a gloomy view of general economic prospects. It was a conception which soothed the consciences of the economic elite, but it had few comforts, no hopes, and only a little encouragement for the masses. This was a serious deficiency in the late nineteenth century, when new radical conceptions of the economy were being promoted by proponents for cheap money in the turmoil of the politics of Greenbacks and re-sumption. Soon the voices of "republican" labor unionists, of Henry George and his followers, and early populists signified the beginning of a politici-
zation of the idea of the economy." In 1876 the conservative economist, Charles F. Dunbar, warned that "the incredulity of ignorance" multiplied the difficulties of "restoring financial health" to the nation. "As our condition approaches more and more to that of old countries, our ability to rely upon the increasing abundance of our resources to cure all [economic] mistakes will disappear," Dunbar wrote. "With the dangerous forces now growing within our democracy," the lack of more effective doctrines could well mean "political death."

American economists could find no industrial equivalent to the expanding frontier of the agrarian economy. Their belief in the wage fund dictated that the growing working class was doomed to compete for a predetermined fund of wages. The prospects of scarcity and of industrial conflict turned into the reality of the panic of the early 1870s and the severer strikes and labor unrest of the middle of the decade. But perhaps even more important was the fact that economists, such as Atwater, who strongly believed in the ethical foundations of the economy, were troubled by their Puritan belief that the majority of mankind was marked by its proclivity to sin and vice. The few who were elected for economic salvation were literally fighting a losing battle against corruption that infected the growing army of middlemen, managers, unionists, and others who conspired in restraint of trade. These fears have generally been overlooked when the doctrines of social Darwinism and William Sumner are allowed to dominate the historical picture of late nineteenth century economic doctrine. In social Darwinism, those fit for survival could be expected to measure up to adversity. But for economists who adhered to the residue of Puritan doctrine, there were strict limits on human improvement. The idea of the economy was cyclical rather than genuinely progressive. Atwater and others saw the depression as a means of cleaning out the unworthy, as a ritual of purification that at best would restore rather than improve the moral foundations of the economy. Despite enormous material advances during the century, economic doctrine at the college level remained deeply punitive in spirit.

In 1883, a few years after he had left Princeton, Wilson returned to the study of political economy. At The Johns Hopkins University Wilson met the outspoken teachers of an alternative conception, a progressive conception of economics, which was largely carried over from Germany, where it had been developed in part as a defense against the Marxist challenge to liberal economics, and in part in support of the economic policies of the new German Empire. For those who believed that material prosperity was limited to what the ethical improvement of man would allow, the new idea of a state-directed economy came as a great relief. The central idea was that
state power could be brought to bear upon the economy in such a way as to make moral elevation dispensable. Wilson's teachers, especially Richard T. Ely, who became the best known spokesman for progressive economics, were under no illusion that human conscience and moral rectitude were enough for the effective promotion of a rational industrial development. While Wilson was at the Johns Hopkins, Ely worked to organize the American Economic Association, which was to take as its article of faith that "a progressive development of economic conditions" should be matched "by corresponding changes of policy." The result of this mode of thinking led to a conception of "the state" intended as a substitute for the spontaneous forces for moral improvement.

At the founding meeting of the American Economic Association in September 1886, the first article of the platform stated that the state was to be understood as a permanent agency "whose positive assistance" was one of the "indispensable conditions of human progress." The organizational needs of modern society were beyond the stage where they could be safely managed by shifting popular majorities and changing governments. The actions of the state were not to be directed by constitutional or legal reasoning, but were to be developed by "science," that is, by empirical and statistical study of "the actual conditions of economic life." The mode of action was not politics, but "legislative policy." It was underlined that the new approach should be oriented toward the solution of "social problems." Despite its advocacy of state intervention in the "conflict between labor and capital" and despite its condemnation in an early draft of "the doctrine of laissez-faire," the founders of the new association repeatedly stressed a viewpoint which sought to bypass the politics of interest which was associated with constitutional government. "We take no partisan attitude," as it was put in the platform of the American Economic Association.

Ely and other teachers at the Johns Hopkins taught Wilson to see the state as an organism, an organic structure of growth. The organic metaphor was a welcome substitute for the mechanics of constitutional checks and balances, because it suggested that the basis of political life was to be found in social interdependence rather than in political obligation and consent. In addition, the organic metaphor projected the necessity of continuous development. Political economy was seen as the form of state reason which indicated both the means and the direction for such growth. The notion of the state, however, referring to a plane of interaction between the economic and the political organizations of the country, was itself soon to become a burden for the new association. Henry C. Adams from Michigan University, who had called the founding meeting together with Ely and John Bates
Clark of Smith College, argued that the term "society" was preferable to "the state," which sounded to Germanic for most Americans. "Society" was more apt to absorb both English and German "political philosophy." The idea of society referred to "tight organic unity about which all reasoning should center." Both "state action and industrial activity of individuals" were to be seen as "functions of the organism, society." The idea of "harmony and proportion between the various parts of organic society" was to guide the new science which centered upon "the problem" of how "to correlate public and private activity."  

Wilson was deeply involved in the intellectual climate of opinion out of which the American Economic Association emerged. In early 1884 Ely had invited him to coauthor on a textbook on political economy in the United States. Although the project was never finished, possibly because Ely did not find the time to carry out his part, there is little doubt that the outlook of the German historical school of political economy influenced Wilson deeply. Wilson was not present at the founding meeting of the American Economic Association, but his name was mentioned several times among other "progressive men in our colleges who have cast off allegiance to the old political economy." Given these facts, it is surprising that so little attention has been paid to this phase of Wilson's intellectual development. The reason may be that the major source of evidence concerning Wilson's stay at the Johns Hopkins, was until recently, Wilson's own letters to his fiancée, Ellen Louise Axson, which whom Wilson was passionately in love. Longing for marriage, Wilson decided to cut his stay at the university short and left after two years of graduate study. It is hardly surprising that many letters that were intended to express longing for Ellen Axson built up to their point by reference to tedious reading, dusty books, long hours in the library, and pompous professors. It was only when Wilson's notes were rediscovered in the early 1960s that it became clear that the Johns Hopkins had had a significant impact upon Wilson's political thought.

Wilson's studies at the John Hopkins turned his attention away from its earlier focus upon constitutional questions, deliberative assemblies, and cabinet government. The ideas of the German historical school encouraged Wilson to think about society as a self-governing whole, in which both government and corporations had a permanent functional role. The natural counterpart to economic science was the study of administrative efficiency. Wilson's ideas about administration began with the premise that new knowledge, even science, needed a social carrier, a specific group or class of agents, if it was to have an impact upon the real world. In one of his first
writings after he left the Johns Hopkins, Wilson declared that the new economists lacked this premise. They seemed to assume that scientific truth would fall from the sky and convince everybody. They had no conception of political power, embodied in a human agency would condition public opinion and politicians for new modes of action.\textsuperscript{21} The most effective statement of these ideas were contained in Wilson's article, "The Study of Administration," which was written in the fall of 1886, a little more than a year after Wilson had left the Johns Hopkins. It was published in the *Political Science Quarterly* in July 1887.\textsuperscript{22}

Wilson's advocacy of administrative study must be understood against the background of a traditional America animus against bureaucracy. One of the specific charges against King George III in the Declaration of Independence had been that the King had "erected a multitude of new offices, and sent hither swarms of officers to harass our people, and eat out their substance." This early indication of popular hostility to administrative arrangements was hardly diminished either by Jacksonian democracy or by the growth of American liberalism over the nineteenth century. When Max Weber from Germany visited the United States after the turn of the century, he found this sentiment very much alive, not the least among workers who told him:

We prefer having people in office whom we can spit upon, rather than a caste of officials who spit upon us, as is the case with you [in Germany].\textsuperscript{23}

Broadly stated, Wilson's intention was to prove that American democracy would of necessity have to adopt a mode of government which ran counter to democratic sentiment. A historical process was at work in modern democracy which produced to opposite of earlier democratic intentions. Wilson's argument had two sides, one which dealt with the nature of administrative tasks and one which deal with the nature of modern government. Wilson showed that recent development of the "complexities of trade and the perplexities of commercial speculation," of "monopolies," of "corporations," and of the conflict between labor and capital challenged the political sphere with a new order of problems. No less pronounced was Wilson's insistence that democratic government was unfit for measuring up to these challenges. A government which was supposed to reflect public opinion lacked the internal coherence, the "definite locality" of power, and the proper knowledge to act upon these new conditions. The "multitudinous monarch called public opinion" made it almost impossible to organize gov-
ernment effectively. As Wilson argued,

> the people will have a score of differing opinions. They can agree upon nothing simple: advance must be made through compromise, by a compounding of differences, by a trimming of plans and a suppression of too straightforward principles. There will be a succession of resolves through a course of years, a dropping fire of commands running through a whole gamut of modification.\(^{24}\)

How could the contradiction between democratic sentiment and the needs of the democratic state be overcome? Wilson argued that administration in America could be derived from ideas and practices associated with society, rather than from the systems of centralized power that prevailed on the European continent. Throughout the centuries, bureaucracy had invariably been imposed upon society by the state in order to serve state needs for order and public strength. Administration had been the means whereby the state had shaped society to its purpose. Wilson argued that administration in America could assume the reverse features as the reflection of society and its needs imposed upon government. Administration would therefore not be the symbol of coercion, but the symbol of services needed for social and economic advance. As Wilson wrote in his notes: “Perhaps the task of developing a science of administration for America should be approached with larger observance of the utilities than is to be found in German or French treatment of the subject.”\(^{25}\)

This mode of thinking was congenial to the understanding of society set forth by the new school of political economists who had replaced the notion of the state with society. Wilson’s move to emphasize administration as a reflection of social and economic needs was part of his intent to “Americanize” the study of administration. His dependence upon the contemporary debate among economists was apparent also in other aspects of his article. Wilson adapted the common definition of the new economic science as the general "object of administrative study," which was to study "what government can properly and successfully do" and "how it can do these proper things with the utmost possible efficiency and at the least possible costs wither of money or of energy."\(^{26}\)

As Wilson sought to fit the presuppositions of political economy into the realm of government, the concept of self-interest needed considerable modification. The obvious counterpart to the practice of individual self-interest was, as Wilson implied, a deep-seated suspicion against administration with its claim to represent a higher form of public interest, raised above the bargains of the butchers and the bakers of political liberalism. As
if in a direct rebuttal to this concept of economic man, Wilson pictured a new type of citizen whose features followed from a developing economy of employers and employees. The political consequences of the new economy was to supplement relations of interest with relations of trust. Trust implied the delegation of responsibility, a consideration of competence proven over a period of time which allowed power to take hold in a settled relationship. In a striking parallel to Adam Smith's citizen, who bargained with his baker on the basis of immediate, self-evident form of interest, Wilson presumed that economic interaction contained a delegation of power: "The cook must be trusted with large discretion as to the management of the fires and the oven," as Wilson put it. Just as "housekeeping" did not necessarily consist in "cooking dinner with one's own hands," self-government could take the form of a permanent delegation of power. "Trust is strength in all relations of life," Wilson underlined. Modern constitutions prepared the citizens for an attitude of "trustfulness." Wilson's idea of trust clearly anticipated the modern idea of legitimacy.27

Wilson's attempt to surround the modern state with the notion of trust may strike the modern reader as a self-defeating venture, given the large element of force which has been associated with state power since the writings of Machiavelli. Perhaps it may be said that Wilson's intention was to acknowledge the presence of state force while at the same time decreasing its visibility. It is clear that Wilson's whole scheme of constitutional evolution in the United States centered upon the changing relationship between citizens and political force. In the first state of constitutional development, the use of force was essentially arbitrary, exerted by absolute rulers of colonial government. During the second state, the phase of constitutional construction, the people staked their claims to power. This period of agitation and uncontrolled outbursts of violence had come to and end with the Civil War. The third phase consisted of a maturing identity between citizens and state.28 In this process, the exercise of force became regular, efficient, and dependable.

Public administration is detailed and systematic execution of public law. Every particular application of general law is an act of administration. The assessment and raising of taxes, for instance, the hanging of a criminal, the transportation and delivery of the mails, the equipment and recruiting of the army, etc., are all obvious examples of administration.29

As Wilson's formulation made clear, even the most extreme application of violence, such as the violation of the property and the life of the citizen, took on a benign character, almost as peaceful and useful as the delivery of the
mail, when force was drained of passion, infused with administrative procedures, and routinized in the name of social progress.

Wilson took pains to underline again and again that administration in America would be a matter of replacing the traditional ethos of officialdom with a spirit of efficiency as the devotion to adjusting means to ends. The separation of means and ends made it possible to identify administrative procedures with the practices of modern business organization.

The field of administration is a field of business. It is removed from the hurry and strife of politics; it at most points stands apart even from the debatable ground of constitutional study. It is part of political life only as the methods of the counting-house are a part of the life of society; only as machinery is part of the manufactured product.

Wilson's repeated stress on business practices and their similarity to administrative methods was not only intended to guard against the taint of bureaucratic high-handedness that blemished the common American image of officialdom. The more important purpose was to identify a set of values and a mode of reasoning that would serve to interconnect the realms of government and economy. The values of efficiency and rationality were posed in contrast to the limitation of power and the institutionalized conflicts that hampered the operation of constitutional government. Administration was an important addition to constitutional government, because its procedures incorporated both executive, judiciary, and legislative functions. Conspicuously missing in Wilson's discussion were ideas that had earlier served to associate the notion of the state with conceptions of justice and equality, concerns that were central to the contemporary idea of democratic government. In a crucial paragraph Wilson argued that the idea of administration made it possible to achieve at least a temporary freedom from the constraints of politics and even traditional morality:

When we study the administrative systems of France and Germany, knowing that we are not in search of political principles, we need not care a peppercorn for the constitutional or political reasons which Frenchmen or Germans give for their practices when explaining them to us. If I see a murderous fellow sharpening a knife cleverly, I can borrow his way of sharpening the knife without borrowing his probable intention to commit murder with it; and so, if I see a monarchist dyed in the wool managing a public bureau well, I can learn his business methods without changing one of my republican spots. He may serve his king; I will continue to serve the people.
This image is sometimes read as Wilson's advocacy of a distinction between broad policy goals and administrative implementation. This reading may suffer from insufficient attention to Wilson's language. His choice of an example turned the student of administration into an accomplice, while he emphasized that the instruments of force could be translated into "business methods." In view of these features, Wilson's intent is probably better described as an attempt to formulate the separation between power and legitimacy. His refusal to specify political ends allowed Wilson to enter a modern trend of thought which is now usually associated with Max Weber's definition of the state as a political association committed to the accumulation of power for varying ends. But while Weber stressed the use of force as overt coercion, Wilson sought to articulate a notion of state which was aligned with business power. The interrelationship between business and government was expressed in the idea of a cost-effective mode of organizing power.

Wilson's idea of administration seems in retrospect to have announced a new century of American politics where it would seem inevitable that the state was strengthened by business power to enhance the capacity to act quickly and efficiently in a world of economic competition and international conflict. In addition, Wilson's parable largely prefigures the past century of debate about the political implications of an administrative state. This becomes clear as soon as it is asked where democracy is located in Wilson's argument: Was it implicit as the distant sovereign, as the innocent bystander, or perhaps as the intended victim of sharp instrumental practices?

Wilson would undoubtedly have been greatly surprised to learn that his essay was later to be hailed as one of the founding papers of administrative science in America. He was even surprised when he received notice that the editors of the Political Science Quarterly wanted to consider his article for publication. He wrote back to Edwin R. A. Seligman that he had not planned his paper as a substantial outline of administrative study, only as a consideration of "various outside points of view," as a semi-popular introduction to administrative studies. Indeed, Wilson's essay was not afforded much attention until Dwight Waldo argued in 1948 that it was "so modern it could have been written yesterday." Wilson's paper articulated a set of premises that presented both a criticism of and an alternative to the constitutional mode of political thought. He did not invent or discover any "operational" rules of administrative behavior, but he assumed that private and public organizations were subject to the same routines required by
efficient application of power and he was the first American scholar to propose that questions of public administration might be severed from substantive political issues. It may well be argued that Alexander Hamilton was the true founder of administrative study in America, and Wilson would hardly have disputed this view. Wilson’s contribution was not to fashion new ideas, but to give current Continental European preferences and notions a form that allowed them to be taught and transmitted—not through governmental practices—but through institutions of higher learning, such as the discipline of political science.

NOTES

* Research for this paper was carried out in the library of the John F. Kennedy Institute, West Berlin and Firestone Library, Princeton University.


7. See, for instance, Munroe Smith, "The Domain of Political Science," *Political Science Quarterly*, I (March 1886), 8, where the state is described as "rapidly becoming, if it is not already, the central factor of social evolution." the conception of the state as "a mere protective association against external force and internal disorder" was described by Smith as "antiquated".


25. Notes on Administration, Nov. 15, 1885, *ibid.*, 49. WW's emphasis.


33. WW to Seligman, Nov. 11, 1886, *PWW*, V, 387.
