

REDEMOCRATIZATION AND THE MODERNIZATION OF THE STATE: THE ALFONSIN ERA IN ARGENTINA

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Introduction

The political science literature has begun to pay greater attention to the effects of recurrent regime changes upon the administration of the state apparatus (Oszlak, 1980, 1986), although this healthy recognition has not yet found a comparable appeal in the field of public management. The reasons are fairly obvious. Most of the academic work in public administration originates in national contexts where the regular succession of governments through elections, the legitimate representation of society through institutionalized mediations, the prevailing incremental decision-making style, or the generalized recourse to bargaining and compromise constitute assumptions -rather than variables- of the political process. These traditions are so pervaded that speculation about other possible scenarios cannot be mirrored in, and hence, stimulated by, local circumstances.

However, the alternation of political regimes exhibiting widely opposed ideologies and orientations, and their respective impacts upon -among other aspects- the policy framework, the fate of the mechanisms of representation, or the style of state management, raise a number of issues and research questions complex enough as to render current models and conceptualizations inappropriate for capturing the complexity of these other realities. Especially, when political instability and regime shifts become not simply a short-lived "abnormality", but rather the current state of affairs.

Argentina is probably a paradigmatic case in this respect, as the constant alternation of authoritarian and democratic regimes has been the outstanding feature of its political system for well over half a century. On six occasions, the military had seized the reins of government and retained control during most of that period. The recurrent wave of military take-overs became, in turn, ever more frequent, more lasting, and more brutally repressive.

On December 10, 1983, a newly elected government was installed in Argentina. With an impressive 52 per cent of the vote, President Alfonsín -the candidate of the **Unión Cívica Radical**- took office after almost eight years of authoritarian rule. The installation of the new democratic government was expected to put an end to the constant presence of the armed forces in Argentine politics. The new democratic government inherited the responsibility of managing the most difficult transition from authoritarianism that the country had undergone along its unstable political life. A country shocked by the horror of repression and murder; deprived of voice and representation; heavily indebted by capital flight, speculation, corruption, and senseless investment; impoverished by weird economic policies and serious mismanagement of the public sector; appalled by rampant inflation nearing 1,000 per cent; and humiliated by defeat in a tragic belicist experience, Argentina was about to initiate its most strenuous return ever to a full fledged and stable democracy.

Less than six years later, on May 14, 1989, the Radical Party government was defeated at the polls.

For the first time after over six decades, the stage was set for a democratically chosen president to hand over executive power to his duly elected successor, a leading figure of the main opposition party. The defeat at the polls of the governing party was somehow anticipated by the results obtained in a previous by-election and by the trends shown by the most respected pre-electoral surveys. In explaining this expected defeat, most observers agreed that one of its main causes was the weak performance of the Alfonsín government in handling the country's serious socioeconomic crisis. Few questioned its impressive record regarding the full restoration of public liberties, human rights and democratic institutions. But the majority pointed to poor management as one of the crucial deficit of the incumbent regime.

The last dramatic episode in this otherwise successful democratic transition, was the resignation of Dr. Alfonsín and the turnover of government to President Menem, several months before the presidential term was due. The decision was taken after recognizing that the Radical government was absolutely helpless in minimally handling macroeconomic and social policies, in the face of the rampant hyperinflation, mass rioting and looting, and wild entrepreneurial behavior ensuing as a result of the deterioration of most socioeconomic indicators and the exceptional levels of uncertainty that accompanied the governmental shift.

This article deals with some of the challenges and constraints faced by the Radical administration in its efforts at managing the transition from authoritarian to democratic rule. It does not attempt to assess the performance or achievements of the Alfonsín government, but rather to highlight some of the main variables that may explain success or failure in dealing with exceptional political transitions. Transitions in which both, the unresolved issues inherited from previous governments and those created by the very redemocratization process itself, seem to overflow the public agenda and seriously impair the state's governance capacity.

The subject will be tackled from the viewpoint of the interacting patterns between political appointees and permanent bureaucrats, especially during the initial years in office of the incumbent government. By focusing on these patterns, the analysis will try to unveil the dynamics of bureaucratic change during the transition. It will also attempt to explain the processes and outcomes originated in the implementation of public policies, as well as their consequences for governance and the transformation of the state apparatus. However, in order to provide a broader framework of the politics-administration issue implicit in this analysis, a few initial remarks regarding the challenges faced by the Argentine state at that time seem necessary.

The challenges of the Argentine state

Three verbs, alternately placed in a single question, condensed the problematique and the challenges implicit in transforming the Argentine state at the time of the transition from authoritarianism: **should/ can/ will** the state continue to play the roles traditionally associated with a "welfare" and a "capital accumulation" orientations? Put differently, these questions raised three sets of fundamental issues around which the debate upon the transformation of the state revolved: (1) the desirable limits of its intervention, the legitimacy of its functional domain, the claim for a subsidiary role, the reconsideration of its size; (2) the prospects of governance vis-a-vis the challenge of the deep structural crisis affecting the country at the time, the depletion of public sector resources vis-a-vis growing social expectations and tensions; and (3) the rigidity and inaction of the established bureaucracy, supposedly due to the resilience of traditional and authoritarian cultural patterns, deemed inconsistent with the values of efficiency and responsible performance. Hence, to

manage the retrenchment of the state, the socioeconomic crisis and the redemocratization process the challenging task of the Alfonsín era.

When observed from the time perspective of the late 90's, some of these questions have been answered in the course of the political processes and the state-society relationships that took place during the intervening period. For example, the national state experienced enormous changes regarding its size and its welfare and privatization policies, as health and educational services were transferred to subnational levels of governments while all previously existing public enterprises were privatized. Similarly, the restructuring of the economy under favorable trade and financial conditions at the international level, brought about sizable rates of growth during the 90's, along with a widening gap between upper and lower income levels of the population. However, for the purposes of this article, the questions posed reflect the challenges of the transition and should therefore guide our analysis. With these caveats, let us consider the issues raised, starting with the "should" question.

In the early 80s, concern with "state shrinking" through retrenchment and reduction of its scope of intervention was gaining an increasing predicament in most Latin American countries (Glade,). Certainly, there was a diffused disgust with the growing dimension of public bureaucracy, which was not limited to neoliberal regimes or ideologues. Even governments that defined themselves as socialists were actively seeking solutions that assigned an increasing importance to the private sector (Boneo, 1985). The legitimacy of the functional domain of the state sector and the relative efficiency of the public and the private spheres in the management of the social agenda had become socially problematized issues. The redefinition of the entrepreneurial role of the state, the deregulation of the economy, the reduction of the bureaucratic machinery, the decrease of public spending, the privatization of public utilities, were raised as the banners of a new political and economic movement demanding a drastic limitation of state interference in social and economic affairs.

The debate was heavily loaded with ideological connotations that placed, on opposite sides, the champions of state "interventionism" and state "retrenchment" (Oszlak, 1984). From an extreme liberal position, the interventionist state was regarded as constraining social initiative and allocating resources suboptimally, as it based its activity upon criteria leading to the hypertrophy of its institutional apparatus. An excessive presence of the state -in this view- appeared to distort or prevent the full operation of the market's benevolent "invisible hand"--the most effective regulating force of social transactions.

Beyond ideological postures, there was little doubt that a large number of the regulatory and interventionist state mechanisms had been promoted by the very sectors that always benefited from the policies involved, despite their rhetorical outcry for state shrinking. The contractor, purchaser, and subsidizer state -besides the entrepreneur and employer state-, had also been some of the variegated faces of this "multifaceted Janus." On the other hand, the expansion of the public enterprise sector had been due to many different factors, among which those derived from the "rescue" of private business firms in trouble were prominent. Besides, the most advanced, industrialized countries were not hesitant in applying various forms of subsidies or regulations -i.e. in the field of foreign trade- that not only entailed a clear interventionist stand but also distorted the normal operation of the markets.

The second issue (our "can" question) was also part of scholarly debate (Groisman et al., 1986). In contrast with most stable and consolidated democracies, Argentina -along with other Latin

American countries- was confronted with the challenge of assuring the governance of its civil society while trying to solve other critical issues. The new redemocratization processes was taking place in the midst of the deepest economic crisis registered in the history of the region. The failure of traditional and modern forms of authoritarianism in solving the crisis, together with the mobilization of the democratic forces, had opened a historical opportunity for the definitive consolidation of democracy. But new democratic regimes confronted these critical circumstances while trying to ensure certain conditions of governance allowing for greater citizen participation, civilized regulation of social conflict and income redistribution towards the less endowed sectors of society. Indeed, a most complex and difficult equation, with scarcely compatible components, that imposed severe constraints upon state management and performance.

One of the paradoxes of the situation was that the deeper the crisis, and consequently the more necessary state intervention to alleviate some of its negative effects, the fewer the possibilities of ensuring the reproduction of the state--and of the society it articulates. The crisis reduced both the resources of the different social sectors and those needed to make the functioning of the state institutions viable. This problem became critical during the transition from authoritarianism to democracy, because the "revolution of social expectations" and the exacerbation of conflicts that emerged with the resurrection of the civil society after years of mutism and wholesale privatization of life, turned the state apparatus into an arena of bargaining, dispute, and arbitration.

Had the political institutions and culture been capable of channeling the disputes and antagonisms in a civilized manner, the allocation or reallocation of resources diminished by the crisis, could have taken place more or less smoothly. But since those democratic institutions and culture had not have the time nor the historical chance to become rooted in social praxis, the crisis potentiated the perverse mechanisms of capitalism that break out whenever a consensual set of rules of the political game is not agreed upon by the relevant actors. Many Latin American countries, which had endured long and violent authoritarian experiences, did not succeed in strengthening those democratic institutions and practices, thus weakening the management capacity of the state.

The third challenge (the "will" question) had close links with political instability, demagogic practices, and authoritarian rule--factors having an enormous gravitation upon the institutional life of the state bureaucracy. The new democratic regime, imbued by a political rationality technically informed, had to deal with an institutional apparatus based on a kind of technical rationality that was politically contaminated in the course of long periods of instability, adscriptive practices, and authoritarian residues.

Hence, the inherited bureaucracy -an "administrative widow" of countless political regimes- became a ballast for the new government, especially because the nature of the regime also changed. From a conceptual point of view both, ephemeral and prolonged incumbency tend to crystallize bureaucratic institutions, regulations, and practices. When these turn out to be incompatible with the orientation of a new regime, they become institutional remnants, unburied administrative corpses. They may remain in the structure of the government's apparatus, still competing for valuable resources, but usually deprived of any useful function. The historical reiteration of this trend tend to convert the state bureaucracy into a true "cemetery" of political projects.

A corollary, central to our main concern in this article, follows: beyond the collaborative or conspiratory intentions of permanent officials, beyond the biases acquired in the process of bureaucratic socialization, there is an institutional web, made up of deeply rooted hierarchies, rules, procedures, values, and social practices of which both, the permanent administrator and the

political appointee are, at the same time, creators and creation, victimizers and victims. The more frequent political alternation and the more divergent the dominant policy orientations of the incumbent regimes, the more irrational the bureaucratic web and the greater the difficulties of state management.

Therefore, the "willingness" of the state bureaucracy to adhere to values of responsibility, accountability, participation, transparency, and tolerance –all inherent to democracy- does not depend so much on a deliberate choice by individual bureaucrats but on a mainly cultural transformation, that must also reach the society of which the state apparatus is nothing but a reflection. In the words of the first Secretary of State for the Public Service of the Alfonsín government,

"...we have reached this point because fifty five years ago we have interrupted the effective operation of democracy in Argentina and because we have not been able, since then, to consolidate it as a universally accepted principle. This perverse 'culture' is the administrative correlate of instability and sectarianism, because it is an adaptive answer -not entirely devoid of historical rationality- to a recurrent cycle of aggressions and grievances that our administration has suffered over this long period...Massive dismissals, ideological discrimination, politically biased filters for admission into public office placed in the hands of security services, nepotism, requirements of party affiliation for obtaining entry into public office--we have had everything during these black years of our decline. What else could be expected from a human group so large and so representative of a society in crisis...? Our civil servants were not apostles nor heroes, but ordinary people, and they maladapted to a situation which was even worse. They are paying -and they are collecting from us- the price of instability and sectarianism" (Roulet, 1988).

From this broader perspective, the popular vision of an intermediate strata of treacherous bureaucrats, deliberately committed to slow down and blockade the task of a new government through red tape, slackness or sheer usurpation of decision-making powers, is no more than an appealing and even convincing image, but hardly an illuminating one. To understand the actual impact of the constraints created by this institutional web is, too, part of the information required for designing a viable strategy of state transformation.

The foregoing analysis has provided the broader framework within which we may now proceed to examine the management of the Argentine transition from a more micro level approach: the interface between political appointees and permanent bureaucrats. As it may be already apparent, this issue relates to the third challenge just described. Hence, the remainder of this article will further elaborate on this point, namely on our will question, while bringing into focus, when appropriate, the should and can questions.

"Les unes et les autres"

The first issue of Governance, published at the time comprised by our case study, was devoted to a reconsideration of the century-old politics/administration dichotomy. Although the cases discussed and the theoretical propositions presented in that issue were mainly restricted to Western democracies, it is worth pointing out that even in these stable and consolidated political systems, the relationship between the actual roles played by politicians and bureaucrats in the policy-making process -and its appropriateness- was still regarded as a matter of considerable debate.

In one of the contributions to that issue, the editors alluded to the current belief among political executives that their power had been usurped by the permanent officials in the public service, suggesting that this apparent usurpation is rarely a conscious attempt to sabotage policy or programs. Rather -the authors seem to believe- it is the product of the skills and values which the permanent staff have acquired through years of service and training. But for whatever reasons, the political official will want to establish control over the permanent staff and gain, or regain, control over policy (Campbell and Peters, 1988).

However, in their review of the literature, these authors appeared less confident about the strictly professional behavior of permanent staff, as they raised the problem of policy distortions caused by singleminded pursuit of self-interest by administrative cadres dominating the bureaucracy. This pattern, they contended, had emerged in an even more blatant form in Latin America. Drawing on the works of Sloan (1984) and Valenzuela (1984), they proposed that for the most part, the absence of liberal traditions in this region grants proponents of statist approaches a free hand.

"Government departments in Latin America -whether dominated by generalists or specialists corps- often can put their faces against the political will with near impunity. Under such circumstances, the executive leadership must often resort to the creation of new departments and quasi-autonomous agencies in order to pursue essential elements of their policy agenda (Campbell and Peters, 1988).

This concise statement provides, in my opinion, only a cursory and probably misleading view of the politics/administration relationship in the Latin American scene, while adding to our perplexity as to who are actually the "good" and the "bad" guys in the game.¹

The Argentine experience during the last transition from authoritarianism may shed some new light into this largely unexplored field. An examination of the variegated factors that account for the complex patterns of relationship between political appointees and permanent administrators may offer a more balanced interpretation of public management and the policy process under critical economic and political conditions.²

Just a few months after the Radical government was inaugurated, one of the provincial governors of the winning party held a press conference in which he blamed the middle-level bureaucrats for the slow implementation of public policies:

"I come to call attention to the urgent need of tearing apart the technocratic cobweb that seems to be installed in the federal government...The plans of the Radical government are entangled and delayed at the intermediate echelons of the administration; it is the inheritance left by the military regime, that must be immediately neutralized."

Coming from a man who later became the Radical candidate for the 1989 presidential election, widely praised for his successful managerial record as governor of the province of Córdoba, this statement carried a considerable weight. But was it a full, or even an accurate picture of the

¹ Given the comparative scope of the article under consideration and the scant literature covering Latin American experience, this critique may be a bit unfair. However, to blame the absence of liberal traditions and to speak of a free-hand statist approach appears as an oversimplification of the problem.

² The hypotheses presented emerge from a preliminary examination of extensive interviews conducted during 1987 with some 25 former cabinet members of the Alfonsín government, as well as from secondary sources and my own personal experience as Undersecretary of State for Administrative Reform between 1983 and 1985.

obstacles for policy implementation faced by the Alfonsín government?

To be sure, the image correctly identified a level of bureaucratic action (or rather, inaction) where - experience shows beyond doubt- "something happens" that impedes the due course of policy implementation. Furthermore, it suggested that "somebody", at that level, still imbued by authoritarian values, should be held responsible for this poor performance. Next, if this is the case, the situation should be brought under control by neutralizing this seemingly conspiratorial behavior. Does this interpretation rest on sufficient evidence as to elicit the kind of remedial action being suggested? I doubt it.

In my view, there is a complex set of circumstances surrounding the interaction between political newcomers and permanent officials, that account for different policy making processes and outcomes. They include, among other factors, personal traits (i.e. professional background, leadership style, ideological underpinnings, psychological characteristics, previous experience), established networks of relationships with colleagues, clients, and party men; degree of access to key political figures (like an influential minister or the President himself); nature of the agency's functional domain; degree of dependence on bureaucracy for policy implementation; degree of interagency conflict over resources or policy areas; and prevailing cultural patterns in the institutions concerned. A careful consideration of these variables in a broad spectrum of the Argentine public sector may provide additional clues for understanding this uneasy relationship.

The political newcomers

Let us imagine for a moment a group of a few hundred men and women, who –as most Argentines- for nearly eight years had been living an existence almost exclusively confined to private concerns; whose scarce -if any- political activity was mainly semi-clandestine; and many of whom had been harassed, scrutinized, and persecuted by the repressive institutions of the military regime. This same group of people, after a rather unexpected electoral victory, and on short notice, gained access to political executive office as ministers, secretaries and undersecretaries of state; presidents of public enterprises and decentralized agencies; cabinet advisors; interventors in national universities; and so forth. In no time, their lives had changed dramatically. The policemen they feared were saluting them with deference; formerly disdainful civil servants were now doing their best to please them. They started ringing bells and secretaries, chauffeurs, advisers, errand-boys and porters showed up immediately. Newsmen began to disseminate their image. They were no longer "private" persons. An electoral act had taken them out of anonymity and put them in charge of the administrative machine with which things governments do are done.

Who were they? Mostly professionals (holding in many cases postgraduate diplomas from foreign universities), with a large majority of male lawyers, economists, social scientists, and engineers, in their forties and fifties. Their professional background was mainly technical: they used to work at private offices and consulting firms, at international technical organizations, in research institutions and, in some cases, they had filled very specialized bureaucratic positions. Only a handful had a previous governmental experience as political appointees. Not surprisingly, a great number of the newcomers had been very active in politics at the university, usually as members of the Radical or Socialist parties and student organizations. Many had joined the Radical Party only recently, especially to support Alfonsín's move to win the party nomination; others had no political affiliation or militated in opposition parties. Hence, the number of those having close connections with the official party was meager, especially at the lower ranks of the cabinet.

Not many had experience as private sector managers or businessmen, although this type of background became more common as turnover in the initial cabinet began to grow. They constituted a true intellectual elite, although not a very articulated one. Their socialization process as potential appointees had started only recently, largely in study groups and party patronized technical institutions.

Let us return to our initial image. In the beginning, the bureaucratic "machine" seduced them with its syren chants, by creating the illusion that their authority meant power, that their prerogatives were synonymous to discretionary decision making, that only determination was needed to make their chimeras become real. Soon they discovered that knowing the "instruction manual" was insufficient to operate the "machine".

Those who were experts in their field started to work immediately; but lack of political training often resulted in poor articulation at the critical interfaces with party officials and political appointees in other areas of government. Those with a private sector background, who knew how to survive in a hostile business environment like the Argentine, found themselves in a totally different milieu, where references were lost and decisions had to be taken in solitude. The majority, even when knowing their technical script fully well, felt they were stumbling on a dark stage. The institutional interstices, the files' hideaways, the rituals of bureaucratic pilgrimage whereby every decision must find its way up the administrative ladder, were unknown to most of them. Placed in the assembly-line of the decisional process, with few pauses for reflection, they became overrun by routine decisions, appointments, signing rituals and protocole.

Besides, they had lost the socializing bonds created by the preelectoral struggle, the spaces for collective discussion: the workshops, study groups and party committees. With almost no initiation rites, nor sufficient pre-incumbency "warm-up", they found themselves in charge of a machine that was already functioning, however good or bad. A machine that had changed management but continued to produce paperwork that had to be dispatched, goods that had to be disposed of, regulations that had to be established, and services that had to be delivered. They had dreamed with a zero-sum bureaucracy, but most of them assimilated the hard lesson that their pet projects had to be subordinated to the inexorable logic of the gears, the transmission belts and the filters in place; that government by decree was just an utopian dream,...even when decrees were obtained.

Looking backwards, they realized that the prevailing style of management approximated Hirschman's descriptive formula: motivation outrun understanding (Hirschman, 1964). They attempted to do things fast, send projects to Congress as soon as possible, produce self-legitimizing facts. They preferred to think in terms of a new model of society rather than of a transition: change the rules of the game, hit hard and fast, clean up the house, eliminate corruption and disorder, do not bargain, act before the distabilizers and the corporative interests react.

As a rule, some of the best and more representative technical teams available were placed in each functional sphere of government, but they soon realized that transitions needed good negotiators rather than exceptional experts. Perhaps -they would now tend to agree- it would have been better to reserve the technicians for a later stage.

When asked open-endedly about the ideal profile of a political appointee for the transition, my interviewees indicated a list of atributes which Superman could hardly emulate. In their view, the transitional political manager would have to:

- . Have had previous experience in public management.
- . Be an expert in the respective field, skillful and experienced.
- . Have clear goals and understanding of the political implications of decisions in the field of competence.
- . Have achieved in previous experience some respectable -or better, unusual- results or output.
- . Have managed complex projects, where the human factor was important.
- . Be able to handle many different issues at the same time.
- . Divide work hours between "extinguishing fires" and devising longer term projects.
- . Resist pressure and use a "judo" strategy to take advantage of other's forces in a creative manner.
- . Dominate fear, including physical fear, in the face of threat.
- . Devote about equal time to technical and to political work.
- . Be able to bargain with permanent bureaucrats and enroll them in creative projects.
- . Be able to deal with, and resist pressures from, clients and interest groups.

Whatever the description, which obviously was not unanimous nor fully articulated in each individual case, there was almost total consensus that the described profile was not the predominant one. Respondents also agreed that the prevailing profile was technical, and that the first cabinet should have been more political than strictly professional. The paradox is that if everybody believes that the government did not have the right profile in their cabinet members, probably each of the respondents were contributing, when still in government, to detract from the desirable mix, notwithstanding their more benevolent self-image.

The permanent bureaucracy

If we just considered the political appointee/permanent administrator interface focused by the literature, we would have to describe the profile of the higher civil servants with whom the newly arrived political executives interacted in the course of carrying out their projects. However, I will rather examine the overall bureaucracy as a counterpart of the political appointees, based on the fact that an exceptional transition such as the Argentine requires a more structural approach, given the extent of the discontinuities and the relative weight of inertial factors.

The new government assumed control upon a bureaucratic apparatus with a permanent staff of approximately one million employees, including the central administration, decentralized organizations, public enterprises, the armed forces and certain special accounts. Irrespective of their degree of functional autonomy, the agencies composing this immense organization were distributed among eight sectorial or functional ministries, as well as some units directly dependent from the Presidential Office. Due to constitutional constraints, the number of ministries could not be modified; hence, the ministerial reorganization involved, from the beginning, an overall redistribution of functional jurisdictions at lower levels of the cabinet, namely secretariats and undersecretariats of state.

This was not an entirely new exercise. On the contrary, it was one of the clearest manifestations of the permanent political instability of the country, since the ministerial structure had been modified in the past as many times as governments succeeded each other. Even in the course of a single governmental term there were important reorganizations.

The relevance of the ministerial division of labor, in this case, derived from the fact that it was not always clear who inherited what. As newcomers became more acquainted with their agencies, they discovered that many General or National Directorates within their jurisdiction existed only in paper. Or that certain units which did exist, were not performing any function at all.³ Often, the staff supposedly assigned to certain units had been commissioned to other agencies or just transferred de facto somewhere else.

Another difficulty was the required profile of the permanent staff. It was a widespread phenomenon -also current in other Latin American bureaucracies- to find what I once called the "excess-lack syndrome" (Oszlak, 1972), that is, the existence of supernumerary personnel in lower level clerical positions and the absence of personnel in certain higher level critical posts, such as project evaluation, strategic planning, systems analysis, organizational design, etc.

The problem was compounded by the fact that the new division of labor within the ministerial structure was undertaken under the assumption that a larger number of cabinet positions were needed to accommodate an increasing and specialized number of functions. Thus, the newly born secretariats (32) and under-secretariats (65), which approximately doubled the preexisting total, continued to grow in number reaching a maximum of 43 and 94, respectively. Even though in most cases these units were simply a reconstitution of previous agencies, they nonetheless created a series of staffing requirements of secretaries, advisors, general directors, chiefs of sections or even chauffeurs.

Although this is not the place for an extensive analysis of the characteristics of the inherited personnel, I will just mention some of their fundamental features in order to gain a better understanding of the counterparts of our political appointees. Roulet (1988) described, in a few words, the main traits of the inherited bureaucracy:

"We found a rhetorical public administration, much larger than what was strictly necessary, demoralized, suspected, and criticized by society; with a low self-esteem and a growing self-criticism."

Broadly speaking, it was a rather aged staff, with many years in service, with a relatively high level of instruction although low professional training in high rank positions. The hierarchical and functional structure, prevailing in most governmental units, was heavily distorted. Very few institutions possessed adequate recruitment systems based on competitive examinations and meritocratic criteria. Promotion policies were highly biased due to certain "hierarchization" measures that had eroded the lower level echelons of the bureaucratic structure and padded up the middle-level rungs, while the top remained unaccessible. Thus, the usual pyramidal structure had turned into an irregular inverted polyedrum. This policy found its main explanation in a salary system which, over the previous years, had suffered important distortions derived from the need to solve discrete cases of trade union conflicts through the creation of additional bonuses or artificial promotion to higher levels of the formal organization scale (escalafones).⁴ Hence, the Argentine

³ A former Secretary of Industry reported that forty years before, during the first Peronist government, there was a post-office in his agency in charge of a useful classifying function of the department's mail, staffed at one time with 40 employees. At the time of our interview, it was a huge office where no mail was received and four survivors of the once active unit were anxiously asking for something to do.

⁴ To illustrate this point, in a study of the National Grain Board, a decentralized institution of the federal government, it was found that over a ten-year period, the highest three categories comprised an increasing number of agents, ranging from 18% in 1975 to 38% in 1985.

public sector ended up creating nearly 200 different escalafones and an even larger number of salary systems.

Incoming political appointees had to work under the assumption that most of the permanent staff would remain, given the right to inamovability contemplated in the Civil Service Statute. Although past governments had used extensively exceptional powers of dismissal by decree (prescindibilidad) to get rid of undesirable personnel, the Alfonsín government decided not to resort to this extreme measure. Instead, cabinet incumbents were given authority to dismiss active or retired members of the armed forces occupying civil service posts, as well as employees that had been hired during the twelve-month period previous to the installation of the new government. Since, on the other hand, the possibility of hiring new personnel was not unlimited -and conditions became stiffer with the fallout of the inherited crises- the newcomers found themselves in the difficult position of starting to work with an almost unchangeable staff, believed to be the bearers of all the stigmatizing features associated with an inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy.

Interactive patterns

Let us now turn to the ways political appointees organized their relationships with the permanent staff. In my interviews, I raised the question of the extent of previous knowledge about the established bureaucracy which newcomers possessed before taking office. The strategies used in dealing with this personnel and in establishing a stable and productive working relationship were also brought into the questionnaire.

Most political appointees used different channels for obtaining information about their future collaborators. In some cases, this information was very elaborate, including professional background of higher level officials, political affiliation, special qualifications for certain tasks, emotional stability and degree of conflictivity. Their purpose was basically to distinguish amongst this personnel in terms of competence, loyalty and ethical behavior. But in most cases, the information was partial, incomplete or heavily prejudiced.

Upon taking office, distrust was at its peak. Every political appointee had to learn how to discriminate who was who, before assigning responsibilities of any kind, and how to sort out the extremists of any sign from the loyal and competent ones. They found those who had endured authoritarianism and maintained public employment as a source of income, while disguising their militant sensitivity for human rights, justice and democracy. They also found the politically insensitive, who could adapt to any situation and were prepared to be "useful", without interfering nor trying to become too conspicuous. Slowly, they discovered the enthusiasts, but also the mean and the corrupt.

The number of personnel dismissed was fairly low. In general, although the initial impressions were confirmed, many arrived at the conclusion that the bad guys were not so bad, nor the good ones were so good. Even the ones they brought in themselves were found to be less competent than expected. The black legends became more variegated. A more balanced and finely tuned view was finally gained.

Some of the permanent officials became close collaborators of the new incumbents. On the job experience was usually the best test for evaluating competence, performance and loyalty. But it took a considerable amount of time, especially when new programs and projects had to be devised

while routine work could not be discontinued. As one former undersecretary put it, *"while the newcomer lost time trying to find out who was who, the permanent bureaucrat lost time trying to demonstrate how good and trusty a person he or she was."*

Moreover, even when the newcomers were able to obtain useful information about the permanent staff, it was difficult for them to remain totally detached from the intrigue and slander usual in such cases. Biased "evidence" precluded the possibility of getting a true picture: false information, fueled by personal interests, fear, prejudice or revenge, often became a hindrance rather than a help.

Many political appointees report that loyal and motivated bureaucrats, eager to get rid of the stygma attached to their condition, or to demonstrate their commitment to democratic values and accountability, or to look for a last chance of finding in governmental service a source of personal realization and self-esteem rather than the frustration of a mutilated professional life-experience, became unexpected collaborators. Unfortunately, these were exceptions in most cases. Other incentives, besides the opportunities created by democracy, had to be offered in order for these exceptional bureaucrats to become a sizable number. Particularly, responsibility of managing clearly defined programs, as well as material incentives consonant with the responsibilities assigned. These conditions could be met in very few cases. The message from fellow bureaucrats, deeply embedded in the culture of the civil service, often put a brake on excessive commitment: *"Do not excel too much...they will leave anyway. Nothing lasts more than two years here, except us."*

There were newcomers who could not even acquire a proper opinion of their permanent staff, because there was not just enough work to be assigned to them in many cases. Certain programs had to be discontinued because they were no longer in line with the new policy agenda, but the existing personnel was untrained for many of the new priorities or, at least, knowledge about their potential expertise was not readily available. Trial and error was usually the rule.

Given these conditions, there was a marked preference for incorporating new, better known, and politically akin staff. This was facilitated by the great number of newly created agencies. Most newcomers dreamed with an ex-novo bureaucracy. As a matter of fact, this trend caused a strong increase in personnel. During the first two years in government, the bureaucracy grew by about 10 per cent.

However, in most cases institutional "newness" was simply the same old wine in new casks. With an additional disadvantage: new agencies often resulted from reorganization of older agencies regrouped under new labels, requiring personnel reshuffling, new organization charts, new rules and procedures, all of which generated enormous delays in the launching of new initiatives and projects.

Organizational specificities

So much for the broad patterns. A deeper understanding of the dynamics of the interaction would now have to consider certain organizational specificities. I shall examine size, length of the chain of command, dependence on bureaucracy for policy implementation, and degree of personnel "corporatness."

The first factor seems fairly obvious: the sheer number of people counts. It is quite different to be in charge of none, 200, or 90.000 employees. The "remoteness" of the agencies and personnel to be

supervised, as well as the variety of policy issues involved, change considerably with staff size. A good example of this situation is the relationship between the large public utilities corporations and the ministries in charge of overseeing their activities. Probably in no other field of the public sector has the Alfonsín government encountered so many difficulties in finding out ways of effectively supervising the operation of state agencies as in this area. Responsibility was highly fragmented. Aside from the tutoring ministries directly involved (i.e. Public Works and Services, Economic Affairs, Defense), a number of governmental units created, eliminated, or successively put under the authority of different departments, shared vaguely supervising powers over these public enterprises and were usually involved in open conflict with each other.⁵

A related factor is the length of the chain of command. The higher the position, the more remote the distance with the operational staff, and the greater the difficulties of directly controlling the outcomes of the implementation process. Thus, in their relationship with cabinet members, General Directors of the same jurisdiction tended to exhibit, caeteris paribus, different degrees of autonomy and power associated with the mere size of the units involved and the number of steps required for reaching a decision or having things done. In turn, cabinet members got acquainted with the internal dynamics of the smaller divisions faster, while enjoying better chances of bypassing obstructive directors through closer contacts with lower level personnel. In the larger divisions, the organizational boundaries appeared to be sharper and the possibilities of access more unlikely.

Interaction is also affected by the degree to which the functional domain requires permanent officials to get policies implemented. There are cases in which this dependence is very high, as in the delivery of most public services or the collection of taxes. If the "street level" bureaucrat or the revenue agent are corrupt or unwilling -for whatever reason- to carry out their work properly, not only performance will be poor but, in addition, the political appointee will be unable to take over the function personally or assign it to a parallel, redundant, staff. However, there are cases in which the "distance" between policy formulation and policy implementation tends to be negligible. For instance, a minister of foreign relations, working with a small staff, may adopt certain policies (i.e. signing a treaty with a foreign country, entering a regional agreement, promoting cooperation from international donors) that do not require a long implementation chain. Embassies may play a mainly protocolar role, while crucial policies really revolve around, and come to depend upon, the shrewdness and capacity of a very small, committed and coherent team. This was precisely the case of the Argentine Ministry of Foreign Relations, probably the agency with the most successful policy record of the Alfonsín government.

Finally, the politics/administration dynamics may also vary with the degree of personnel "corporatness". There are important differences in managing the armed forces, R&D institutions, the hospital system, or the foreign service. Military officers and professional diplomats share certain common characteristics regarding strict recruitment patterns, hierarchies and ranks, promotion rules, horizontal mobility (i.e. destinations), and even comparable international standards of behavior and performance. These types of institutions are difficult to penetrate, except by politically appointed insiders, but authority can be more easily exerted and obedience obtained, especially when retired officers or career diplomats are put in charge of certain strategic line units. In other cases -like in the hospital system or the R&D institutions- access may be easier but the exercise of authority more difficult, since the organizational structure is looser, more feudalistic, with roles less

⁵Among the agencies involved, I should mention the Secretariats of Planning, Civil Service, Control of Public Enterprises, Growth Promotion, the Auditor General of Public Enterprises, an interministerial committee for privatization, and finally, a holding-like Directorate.

clearly defined and rules not generally accepted.

The situations just examined are not intended to exhaust the full spectrum of differential patterns of interaction between permanent and political executives. They simply attempt to call attention to their variety and to underline the importance of their specification in order to obtain a better understanding of the dynamics involved.

Conflicts in policy implementation

One major conclusion that can be drawn from our interviews is that almost nobody believed in a conspiratorial established bureaucracy: there is no "big trap" deliberately placed by a group of permanent officials sharing a premeditated intention of hindering political initiatives and projects. If there were such a trap, it would have been easy to remove. The problem is that instead of a trap, there is a cobweb and a labyrinth, much more difficult to disentangle or find a way out.

Barriers to successful implementation of public policies may lie either within the agencies themselves, across the bureaucracy, or outside the public sector altogether. They may derive from the operational effects of a given cultural and normative set of values (i.e. orientation towards time or authority, acceptance and diffusion of corrupt practices); from the complexity of the established routines for processing decisions; from the overlap of functional domains; from the degree of antagonism created by the policies pursued and the resistance thus ensued; from the weight of routine workload vis-a-vis innovative projects; or even from the lack of clear goals or priorities. Let us consider some of these inhibiting factors of policy implementation.

When I consider instability as a normal state of affairs, I mean a process in which behavior must constantly adapt to changing and uncertain circumstances. Between 1940 and 1980, turnover of cabinet members in the Argentine public sector averaged about one year in office. In many public enterprises and decentralized agencies, the average figure was even lower.⁶ Under these conditions, a permanent official, subject to recurrent suspicion from newcomers and sometimes asked to follow widely divergent policy directions, will expectedly tend to adopt a cautious and defensive attitude towards new incumbents. Roulet (1988) has provided a very incisive description of this character:

"If you are his superior, the permanent official would be a person exhibiting a neutral look and a benign face, who would try to guess just what is it that you would like to hear so that he could tell it to you, instead of expressing his true thoughts. If, instead, you are his subordinate, you would find another official -yet perhaps the same person- with very little time available and not much willingness to hear what you have to say, who will transmit to you certain instructions or demands possibly originated in, or attributed to, 'higher levels of authority,' and enunciated in the least compromising and more ambiguous form possible, so that any error in implementation could be attributed to the misinterpreter located at the end of the chain of command, rather than to the confusing message originated at his own level of emission."

This vivid picture does not necessarily reflect the aggregate of the permanent staff, but it is certainly

⁶ For example, in the reported study conducted at the National Grain Board, it was found that the average period of incumbency since 1967, had been only 8,5 months. It appears that a similar pattern exists in other key agencies, dealing with highly controversial policy issues (i.e. price controls, tax administration, foreign exchange regulation).

a faithful description of a predominant pattern.

Some incoming political teams have spent a great deal of time holding extensive investigations of budgetary disbursements and personnel behavior, following charges of corrupt practices and serious mismanagement. Institutions like the National Council for Scientific and Technological Research were immersed over long periods of time in finding out evidence about budgetary transfers made to ghost institutes and research centers by officials of the previous military regime. A former Secretary of State reported that the proceedings of investigations carried out at various units of his Department amounted to 800 kilograms of documents, sent for further action to the Auditor General for Administrative Investigations. A major reorganization of the Internal Revenue Service and the Customs Service had to be undertaken in order to bring their operating units under closer scrutiny. Similar accounts have been obtained from other agencies.

With regard to the complexity of established routines, newcomers soon realized that the implementation of most policy decisions did not depend exclusively on the authority, resources, and willingness of their own agencies, but rather on a succession of decision "stations", most of which were located outside the agency in which policy was originated. "This can be done", "that cannot be done" became for them a matter of daily learning. Thus, they found out that in order to appoint someone they had to obtain "an approved structure" (sic), and that in order to "obtain a structure" they had to "get a budget", and in order to "get a budget", they had to...and so on. They learned that the Accounting Act, the Basic Civil Service Statute, the Court of Accounts and other institutions of this sort (always written in capital letters) were the untouchable of the tribe: taboos to be honored, bad spirits that would punish those who dared disobeying their rules. "Thou shalt not appoint", "Thou shalt not purchase without a previous bid", "Thou shalt not receive without a voucher your desk fellow's file" were assimilated as commandments of a rigid decalogue, the transgression of which promised irreparable disgrace.

Everything was minutely regulated but, paradoxically, the legal framework applicable to a discrete case could be totally uncertain. Neither the memory or the experience of the permanent staff, nor the scrupulous but always incomplete legal digests, could alleviate the political incumbent's disquieting feeling of deciding by approximation, by trial and error. Like the dilettante described by Max Weber, always exposed to sign documents on the mixed basis of suspicion, candor, and sheer ignorance.

The feudal nature of the bureaucracy complicated intra-agency coordination and mutual control. Time became less relevant than space: where is the file and what office has to act next, were the relevant questions, instead of when will a decision be reached, which was always uncertain and seldom under control. Decision was not a matter of time but of a physical sequence. The policy implementation process resembled a conveyor belt, where facts and opinions are added at different station points to a file that grows relentlessly on its way of reaching a decision. Most likely, those intervening in the process were beyond the authority of any single policy unit. In a way, it was a checks-and-balances system that tended to strengthen a feudalistic and non-accountable bureaucracy.

Overlapping and conflict with other functional areas were almost impossible to avoid as there was no tradition of interagency coordination. In addition, since the number of ministries was restricted to a maximum of eight, the actual broader division of labor took place at the secretariat level. Most ministries remained, in fact, as conglomerates of secretariats, put together on the bases of vicinity of functional domain or plain tradition. Hence, the Ministry of Education and Justice, with over

300,000 employees, was in charge of the various levels of education, of science and technology, justice, and cultural affairs. The Ministry of Economic Affairs, in turn, held authority over some public enterprises, the Treasury Department, the Central Bank, Regional Development, Mining, Industry, Commerce, Foreign Trade, Agriculture, Cooperatives, and so on.

This arrangement promoted an autonomous functioning of the various state secretaries, who in turn divided up their fiefdoms in several undersecretariats. An extreme case was the Ministry of Labor, where there was a Secretary of Labor and a Secretary of Social Security; but one layer below, there were Undersecretaries for Labor, for Social Security, for Labor and Social Security, and a Coordinating Undersecretary. Hence, besides any other possible external overlap with other agencies, there was clearly an internal overlap within the Ministry itself.

Many decisions were taken without due consultation with all agencies involved. The old bureaucratic definitions of competence over functional domains was maintained: agencies would either deal with, intervene, or simply participate in the decisions concerning the various policy areas or issues. But in most cases, it was difficult to determine who, or which agency, should have been involved. Decisions were made on the basis of personal initiative and political leverage, with little collaborative effort with other parties involved. As most previous informal mechanisms for coordination had been eliminated, every inter-ministerial or interinstitutional committee had to be devised anew.

Hence -it is reported- certain policies on capital goods development, steel industry, railroad equipment, or ship-building industry were taken without consultation with the Secretary for Defense Industrial Production, who held authority over a sizable military industrial complex. Or a bill regulating port activity was sent to Congress by the Ministry of Public Works, without consulting with the National Grain Board, the most important user of port facilities in the public sector. Or, as a final illustration, decisions on vacancies freeze or procurement regulations were made by different agencies, bypassing the mandatory intervention of the Civil Service Department.

Interagency conflict had many other manifestations, including frequent clashes between agencies and the Secretariat of the Presidency--the last screening instance before an Executive decision could be reached; with the civil service trade unions, which in some cases implied that a cabinet member had to bargain with as many as fifty different labor organizations; or with monitoring and control agencies, like the Accounts Court, the Treasury Department or the Civil Service Secretariat.

The degree of social antagonism caused by policy implementation is another important source of explanation of its success or failure. As early as 1964, Hirschman pointed out this variable as a crucial one for interpreting policy outcomes in the Latin American experience (Hirschman, 1964). Management will be facilitated to the extent that services, goods, sanctions, or regulations can be delivered without much resistance from clients (in the broadest sense of the term). Customers will welcome improvements in the delivery of public utilities' services, a better functioning of railroad transportation, or an upgrading of the school system. They will strongly endorse a policy of food distribution to the extreme poor. Opposition may arise only from certain political or interest groups that may question the financial arrangements of these policies or, in the latter example, its possible ideological or hidden demagogic motives. Even foreign policy, when conducted within certain expected patterns, will very unlikely cause any major antagonisms.

Conversely, policies on tax administration, interest rates, price controls, foreign exchange; on medical care upsetting powerful trade union controlled clinics; on human rights and the handling of

military trials; on industrial development affecting location, branch or size of industries, will most likely meet with fierce opposition from well entrenched interest groups. Our data strongly suggest that these fairly obvious differences should nonetheless be seriously considered in any assessment of managerial capabilities of governmental agencies, given their distinct impact upon the policy implementation process.

The conflict between routine and innovation was also regarded by our interviewees as a major constraint on policy implementation. Routine may result from constant repetition of programmed operations and decisions; or from the daily resolution of conflicts and crisis resulting from the implementation of current policies. In both cases, routine becomes an eternal struggle with the present, which precludes the possibilities of imagining the future--after all, what state transformation is all about. Finding the time necessary for reflection and elaboration, for designing new programs and devising new strategies and priorities, was probably the greatest lament amongst political incumbents. A former undersecretary of state suggested that it would have been a good idea to have every new initiative in final form, with all instrumental resolutions prepared, before taking office, so that within a three month period, all major decisions would have been adopted and the corresponding programs would have been under way. Naive as it may seem -and probably is-, this statement epitomizes the extent to which managing a transition in which discontinuity is essential, but inertia and routine are overwhelming, may exhaust the enthusiasm and fortitude of the most capable and best motivated political executives.

My final point concerns the lack of clear goals and priorities. I do not mean to say that political executives did not know what to do or how to do it. Most had clear visions of a desirable future scenario in their respective policy fields. But it is quite a different thing to convert these "images" into a consistent set of policy instruments, ranked by priority, scheduled over time, and backed by adequate resources. Such a task requires an institutionalized planning system which most governmental agencies lacked. The units formally assigned with this responsibility were usually unable to perform it, either because the information systems were deficient, the agency's policies were not made explicit, or the unit did not possess the legitimacy needed to convey their proposals or persuade policy makers.

In addition, the normative frameworks (i.e. legal statutes) of most public institutions tend to refer to their mission, goals and jurisdictions in sufficiently broad and ambiguous terms as to almost embrace and legitimize every possible program of action. Being so encompassing, these institutional goals do not provide any effective guidelines for action. Hence, shifting and contradictory policies may demand -with similar titles- being faithful translations of the legislator's intentions.

In the absence of precise guidelines, compulsive action disregards any rational choice approach or any patterned scheme of stages and instruments for policy implementation. Short-term, contingent decisions replace strategic planning. The future disappears as a significant temporal dimension for action.

High turnover in cabinet positions makes things even worse. Ephemeral political teams barely reach the point of recognizing, even in an incomplete fashion, the nature of the agencies' mission, the state of the projects and activities under way, the relative priority of the problems to be solved, and the adequacy and capability of the permanent staff. Immersed in this accelerated process of learning and absorbed by the demands of conjunctural decisions, they fail to even sketch their own programmatic guidelines and operational plans.

Concluding remarks

The Argentine transition to democracy implied unusual challenges for state management. It put on trial the capacity of a governmental team in dealing with an explosive policy agenda, fueled by the pressures and expectations of long years of frustration and decay. Dr. Alfonsín's presidency ended abruptly, but most of the structural problems confronted by his government six years before remained unsolved. Much was accomplished in the consolidation of democratic values and institutions, public liberties and human rights. But indebtedness and economic crisis, with their sequel of stagnation, inflation, speculation and income deterioration, continued to harass the succeeding government.

Over the years, the questioning of the role of the state gained increasing predicament both in the society and within the government itself. However, the reduction of public expenditures and the incipient process of privatization were still insufficient to alleviate the fiscal crisis of the state. In turn, changes in the bureaucratic apparatus were limited and highly dissimilar according to the governmental area considered. It took another ten years (1989-1999) until some of the challenges of the 80's –Latin America's lost decade- slowly began to find new solutions, albeit at the high cost of structural adjustment.

This article has provided a preliminary reflection on the challenges involved in managing the transition to democracy, and on their consequences upon the process of policy implementation. It showed that the transition from authoritarian rule faces severe and narrow limits concerning the extent and contents of public policies. Far from having the seemingly unlimited time necessary to pursue its political project -that authoritarianism claimed to have- the extent and rhythm of public management under democratic rule was strongly conditioned by the very inertia of political liberalization that precedes and accompanies the establishment of these regimes.

In sharp contrast with the passage from democracy to authoritarianism, where there is almost no transition, the liberalization and redemocratization processes are gradual and conflictive stages. Particularly, because the demise of authoritarian regimes usually coincides with the outbreak of social crises which are even deeper than the ones that "justified" military intervention. In any case, the possible "treatments" of these crises, available to one or another type of regime, are exact opposites, for they imply putting into play management styles consistent with totally different values, social practices, and power relationships.

The democratic regime may thus create antagonistic forces and offensive actions which, under authoritarian conditions, would have been unlikely. The institutional network of democracy, its breaks and countervailing forces, may retard -sometimes beyond prudence or will- the initiation of badly needed projects, thus failing to comply with electoral promises. The inertia of the state bureaucracy, the constraints imposed by budgetary cuttings, the difficulties for the renovation of staff, and the mutual distrust between political appointees and permanent bureaucrats, constitute additional retarding factors under political circumstances calling for speed and effectiveness. Ultimately, these factors may turn out to be inevitable costs of institutional redemocratization.

Against this background, our analysis concentrated mainly on the difficulties encountered by the Radical government in its attempt to utilize the institutional state apparatus inherited from the military regime, for the implementation of its political program. This analysis was not meant to be a critical evaluation of governmental performance but rather a more in-depth examination of the patterns of relationship established between political and permanent officials, within the framework

of other structural factors intervening in the process of public policy implementation. In this respect, the most salient features of these two types of officials, their interacting behavior and the conflicts faced in the formulation and execution of policy were successively analyzed.

Our preliminary findings must still be put within a more articulated conceptual framework. Even though some of the theoretical work in this field offers important insights for unveiling the intricacies of the processes investigated, I believe that the exceptional characteristics of the case considered vis-a-vis those normally dealt with by the specialized literature, require further conceptual development. Particularly, in view of the fact that the Argentine case finds comparable characteristics in other developing countries.

Institutional instability and its consequences upon the politics/administration interface; degree of dependence upon the bureaucratic apparatus for policy management; degree of congruence between technological and cultural change in the process of state transformation; required and viable styles of state management under different political regimes; types of profiles deemed adequate for political executives during a transitional situation-- these are some of the questions that deserve further comparative research in these unstable contexts.

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