

**PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND ETHICS: A PROBLEMATIC  
CO-HABITATION**

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**ABSTRACT:** *Public ethics is about the good of the community, the common good. Public ethics represents the public interest and citizen's responsibility, understood as collective and distinct from private ethics, for its peculiar and individualistic nature. Ethics in public administration is needed to strengthen public confidence. The Italian Public Administration has about three and a half million employees, is the largest Italian company for numerical size and presents a great variety from a qualitative point of view. Bureaucracy is a synonym for public administration. In the common language assumes a negative value, as bad administration, not working, slow and ineffective. In this way office power has created a sort of meta-language, the so-called bureaucratic language, hard and incomprehensible to the citizens: the triumph of bureaucratic ethos and proceduralism. In the fight against maladministration, is required the promotion of effective education processes, the social condemnation of corruption and moving from a bureaucratic administration model to a service-oriented public administration model. Because public ethics is not an abstract value but the necessary condition for renewing public administrations and, ultimately, liberal democracies.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Public administration; public ethics; bureaucracy; meta-language; proceduralism.*

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Public Ethics concerns the community’s good, the common good. It involves the interest and responsibility of all citizens, meant as a whole community.

The public ethics for public administration is a applied ethics that «deals with the human action of the free citizen who lives in the social community» (Rohls 1995: 7).

For a complete historical and theoretical overview on ethics (Donatelli 2015) and on different aspects related to other “areas” of ethics as applied ethics (Da Re 2010 and Achella, Cantillo, Donise 2011).

In Public Administration, public ethics is necessary in order to strengthen the trust people have in public sector. Furthermore, public ethics is different from private ethics and its individualistic nature, for it does represent the potentiality of the good government.

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Italian Public Administration consists of 3.5 million workers, «and this amount is even greater than this, considering also all the people holding an elective office, or working in a subsidiary company» (Mattarella 2007:7).

The Public Administration is the greatest enterprise in Italy in quantitatively, and the one offering the widest variety from a qualitative point of view.

«Public work is actually made up of several “public functions”: Doctors and nurses in hospitals, teachers in schools of every level and specialization, forces of law and order, people holding an administrative function on local, regional and national basis. Public Administration is thus not an unitary branch, but instead an aggregate of very different professional figures, which most of the time only share a common typology of public employment contract» (Buratti 2011: 2).

With regard to this last theme, it is noteworthy how the very idea of public work is always conceived as «culturally qualified, depending on philosophical, cultural, religious and social paradigms» (Riva 2006: 27).

Among the synonyms most frequently used to mention the Public Administration, there are “administrative apparatus” and “administrative machine”. Particularly in the Italian context, the origin of these alternative names goes back to the end of XIX century, when the Camillo Benso Count of Cavour, in 1853, talked about «administrative wheelworks, during the debate about the law that eventually gave birth to Savoy Administration, which later became the Italian administration»(Varni, Melis 1987: 10).

Nonetheless, the most used synonym of Public Administration as a whole is actually bureaucracy, composed by the French word bureau and the Greek word kratos. This seems, at first sight, also the most neutral way to describe the work that public employees do.

In spite of this, even this word has in time lost his neutrality, acquiring a negative meaning in common speech, along with a plurality of meanings, among which «mala amministrazione»(Panbianco 1986: 386) is definitively prominent.

This process of meaning shift led to a sort of depersonalization, through an improper mistrusting generalization that involves also the public employees: if Public Administration is substantially unproductive, so must be also its employees.

The word Bureaucracy may also define “the power of the offices”, a bureaucratic, self-referential system, withdrawn and separated from the external world.

In this way, the power of the offices created a sort of meta-language, the so-called “bureaucratish”, difficult or even incomprehensible to the citizens; this can be considered a real triumph of proceduralism and bureaucratic ethos.

In other words, there may be the risk that the exaltation of the principles of Public Ethics, such as transparency, may lead to a situation where «their application might fall under the temptation of a bureaucratic-procedural ethos that, at the same time, claims itself as genuinely democratic»(Ricci 2015:130).

This meta-language makes communication impossible and glorifies the self-centeredness of Public Administration. This process has origin in the disruption of the speech which, once become unable to create an efficient communication, leads to the inner division of the human community.

In order to further understand the issues connected to the triumph of “bureaucratish” , and the fight against the so-called “maladministration”, it is absolutely noteworthy to point out that in Italy, since a few years, international institutions often describe both its public and private systems as tightly caught in the net of illegality, inefficiency and corruption.

Facing the theme of corruption in politics and society means talking about the future of advanced societies: this because corruption in great democracies involves high economic and social costs.

The issue caused by the presence of corruptive behaviours in several European States is held in great consideration by the Communitarian Institutions. Statistics show that corruption in Europe has a cost of circa 120 billion per year: the same amount of the whole European Union's budget.

Behavioural patterns observed in the corruption milieu are indeed very similar to those described by C.Geertz in his *Bazaar Suq*: «Patronage relationships are not dependency relationships. They are instead competitive relationships (...) Clientelism reduces the attempts to reach a treatable dimension, and turns an anonymous crowd in a reasonably solid series of familiar antagonisms»(Geertz 1979: 218-219).

In other word, in our country, corruptive phenomenon can be found not only in political class: it equally concerns Public Administration, entrepreneurial class and eventually, the whole society itself. Regarding this point, it can be observed how in Italy, after the II World War, a distorted, degenerated consideration of Public Administration led many people to try to have access in it, as a form of «sycophancy towards a specific political party»(Melis 1998: 64).

On the other hand, it must however be also pointed out how during the years «the tendency to adopt ethical rules, mostly in the form of behavioural codes, has become increasingly relevant. Ethical rules contribute to create a softer rules framework, for they do not necessarily foresee a juridical relevant sanction system. At the same time, it would be incorrect to assert that ethical rules are absolutely lacking of sanctions: violating them can lead to negative consequences (such as the disapproval of one's membership group) that people concerned by them may even consider worse than juridical sanctions. In this sense, this soft-law system is not alternative, but complementary and integrative of the hard-law system»(Merloni 2009: 30).

In addition to what stated above, it can also be observed how there can be a significant risk of social adaptation to corruptive behaviours occurring together with phenomena of irresponsibility of civil society.

«Consequences produced by the insidiously spreading corruption in Public Administration have relevance in terms of reputation, morality and accountability. They represent further costs for the whole community, not expressible in terms of price, which can put at risk (especially in southern Italy) foreign investments, undermine the reliability of institutions and deprive young generations, citizens and entrepreneurs of their hope in the future»(Della Porta, Vannucci 2007: 237-238).

Studies on this theme point out that corruption is the true responsible for the blockage of the democratic system, for it is not a negligible problem at all, but rather «an endemic phenomenon, a sort of meta-system»(Meny, Della Porta 1995: 11).

Therefore, it is absolutely necessary a «consistent counter-action against corruption because, beyond the strictly criminal consequences involved, corruption undermines at the very core the value of impartiality held by the Public Administration, the economic competition defence and eventually put at serious risk the equal opportunities»(Del Grosso 2012: 4).

In other words, economic and social costs produced by the inefficiency and corruption are so relevant to determine a serious loss of competitiveness of the State, and eventually even undermine the basis of the democratic-pluralist system.

In this context, it is necessary to promote efficient educative processes leading to a firm, general moral disapproval of corruption, which would eventually lead to a radical revision of the Public Administration's model itself.

The improvement of Public Administration's action can therefore be pursued by a continuous quality check, the improvement of general public satisfaction level about Public Administration's action, and guaranteeing an appropriate level of its impartiality (Marra 2006). To this regard, it is noteworthy that the value of impartiality of Public Administration's activity finds place in the Italian Constitution itself, in the Article 54: "Those citizens to whom public functions are entrusted have the duty to fulfil such functions with discipline and honour, taking an oath in those cases established by law".

However, in order to follow this path, it is necessary to rethink Public Ethics. This must not be considered as a mere theoretical value, but rather as a necessary condition to renew the Public Administrations (Iacovino, Marino 2007).

As every fundamental value, also Public Ethics must be consistent, independent from particular interests or different incentives in public institutions.

What our society needs, and more specifically the Public Administrations' system as the implications and the consequences of ethical issues on the public servants' behavior needs, are strong fundamental values which can be used as ground to adopt solid rules, respectful of people's rights. At the same time, people should hold behaviors which respect these values and rules. Without recognizing these fundamental connections, it is not possible to shift from a bureaucratic Public Administration model to a service-oriented model of Public Administration, holding the ethical issues and, consequently, transparency as fundamental value in its action.

This overrun of the bureaucratic model finds its logic basis in the so-called "New Public Management", introduced in Italy between the end of 60's and the early 70's of the last century.

This model led to an improvement and a focusing on the aspects of production, efficiency, balanced budget and spending containment, but at the same time it neglected the real capability of the Public Administration to respond, on a qualitative and quantitative basis, to the real needs of citizens.

In conclusion, it is necessary to rethink all the instruments which could be used to promote a culture of legality, transparency and a widespread, deep-rooted Public Ethics, either among the Public Administration's officers and, eventually, among the citizens.

Public Administration, as required by *Codice deontologico e di buona condotta dei comunicatori pubblici*, art.8, Italy, 2003, must adopt a more effective form of transparency, which might «assure the democratic control over the action of both political and administrative class, and consequently allow a genuine involvement of the citizens in the shaping and defence of the Public Interest. Public communicators, in respect of the principle of equality of all citizens, and of the principle of impartiality of the Public Administration, must assure a service-minded action, impartiality, fairness and helpfulness to every citizen, single or associated; to internal audience, and also to other areas of Public Administration».

If corruption shall be perceived not as an invincible system, but rather as a strongly combated phenomenon even inside the Public Administration, eventually «every citizen could gain a stronger confidence in democratic institutions and, maybe, this could even lead to a rigorous application of greater virtuosity by the civil society itself»(Merloni 2009: 5).

Hence, a strong tendency to adopt ethical behaviours is the indispensable condition to allow liberal-pluralist democracies to give new strength to their efforts and gain more hope in their own future.

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