

AD 680695

"SPECIALISTS VS. GENERALISTS" - A MISS-QUESTION

Yehezkel Dror

December 1968

D D C  
RECORDED  
JAN 23 1969  
C

This document has been approved  
for public release and sale; its  
distribution is unlimited.

P-3997

"SPECIALISTS VS. GENERALISTS" - A MISS-QUESTION

by

Yehezkel Dror

The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (on leave)  
and The RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, California\*

Every profession and every discipline is troubled from time to time by many questions which mislead efforts to illusionary problems and feed controversy on meaningless issues. Public administration seems to be especially prone to the disease of miss-questions, perhaps so because of its contemporary characteristics as an undefined mix between diverse activities, a variety of professionals and practitioners, and an eclectic academic discipline.

Whatever the exact causes may be, illusionary problems - usually posed in the form of dichotomies - continue to plague public administration and retard its development as a profession and as an academic discipline. Some of the more misleading questions have gone out of fashion, such as "Is public administration a science or an art?" and "policy vs. administration." Some survive, but adopt a more sophisticated and somewhat less misleading form, such as "staff vs. line." But others persist in all their

---

\* Any views expressed in this paper are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of The RAND Corporation or the official opinion or policy of any of its governmental or private research sponsors.

glamour, serving as reliable barriers to significant improvements in practice and theory alike. One of the most misleading questions in public administration, which has shown especially stubborn survival capacity and is still being seriously discussed today, is "specialists vs. generalists."<sup>1</sup>

The most critical stage in the advancement of knowledge and action is the formulation of more significant and more correct questions. Therefore, the time has come, I think, to get rid once and for all of the "specialist vs. generalist" miss-question. Instead, we need a new question, or series of questions, which express in more adequate ways the real problems which hide behind the "specialists vs. generalists" facade.<sup>2</sup>

To try and get some feeling for the real issues hiding behind the "specialists vs. generalists" formulation, let us briefly consider the meanings in which these terms are used. Limiting ourselves to the more extreme positions, the following picture appears:

As generally used in controversy by the pro-"generalists," "specialist" refers to a narrow, single-disciplinary professional, who has a lot of trained incapacities, views all problems from a very limited point of view, and is incapable of comprehending in a wholistic way the complexities of real-life problems. He is not only one who knows more and more on less and less, but what he knows more about is of decreasing significance. The "generalist," by this same school of thought, is the well-rounded person of superior capacity, who is able to bring to bear a fresh and sharp look and common sense<sup>3</sup> to a variety of problems, unencumbered by too much knowledge about any one of them.

There is also an opposite school which regards the "generalist" as a bungling amateur intolerant of knowledge, proud of his irrelevant literati background and self-confident in his idiosyncratic judgment.<sup>4</sup> In its most extreme form, this school regards "experts" as the pioneers of science in government, who will substitute reliable facts and explicit algorithms for fallible human intuition, if only undisturbed by politics and similar anachronistic carryovers from the pre-scientific epoch.

However overstated, these contrasting statements indicate the logical fallacy of the "specialists vs. generalists" formulation: It reduces a multiplicity of attributes into two patterns, assuming there is some necessary internal relationship which excludes (or, at least, reduces the probability of) other combinations.

Let me elaborate this point a little. Trying to break down the "specialist" and "generalist" prototypes into components, at least four categories of characteristics can be identified, each one of which includes a number of dimensions, as illustrated in Table 1.

It may well be that a hundred years ago, and perhaps also fifty years ago, the class structure of a country in combination with its educational system and the structure of academic disciplines did, in fact, create a few clusters of these various attributes: Thus, in England, academic training at Cambridge and Oxford in classics or mathematics often went together with an open mind, a broad view, elasticity, good intuitive judgment, broad experience, and similar features of the ideal generalist. But this was not

TABLE 1

Some Components of "Specialists"/"Generalists" Prototypes

	<u>Dimension of Each Category</u>
<u>CATEGORIES</u>	
<u>Academic Knowledge</u>	none...much; narrow...broad; monographic...nonographic; substantive (by areas)...methodological (by areas)
<u>Personal Qualities</u>	closed minded...open minded; non-creative...highly creative; rigid...elastic; detail-oriented...general picture-oriented
<u>Experience</u>	high level...low level; one area...multiple areas; center...field
<u>Tacit Capacities</u>	good...bad human relations (in different situations); good...bad intuitive judgment in few...many areas; good...bad managerial talents (in different types of organizations)

---

the result of a direct causal relationship between the attributes (studying the classics resulting in an open mind, etc.), but rather of other variables (e.g., persons with an open mind tending to study the classics). Even less is there reason to assume an exclusive causal relationship, such as only studying the classics can result in an open mind, and so on.

I do not want to overstate my case, as if there are no causal relationships whatsoever. Thus, it may well be that - all other things being equal - some contemporary methods of teaching economics (but not all) tend to result in narrow-minded experts fulfilling many of the negative expectations of the "anti-expert" school. My only claim

is that this is not necessarily so. A revised curriculum in economics can combine rigorous training of the mind with encouraging creativity and education in taking a broad "systems view" of social problems.

The changes in student interests and in socio-economic origin of students, the changes in the structure of knowledge and in methods of teaching, and the changes in the public service itself - all these combine to add to the logical fallacies of the "experts vs. professionals" formulation an even more important behavioral refutation.

Here, the most relevant developments are the changes in knowledge and its teaching which break up the division between "general" and "narrow" subject-matters. Indeed, we can speak with some justification about trying to educate professionals who are experts in how to deal in a broad, innovative, and open-minded way with problems, a kind of "experts in generalism" - a contradiction only in traditional terms but not in emerging reality.

Advances in knowledge and teaching of social sciences, systems analysis, general systems theory, decision sciences, and especially their convergence in an overall policy science - all these may annihilate whatever basis the educational assumptions of the "specialists vs. generalists" formulation may have had in the past. Similarly, new patterns of civil service management - for instance, in respect to rotation, sabbatical leave of absence, and exchange with non-governmental organizations - can do away with the rigid career patterns which are based on the "expert-generalist" assumptions and serve to perpetuate them, though creating a closed circle in which those assumptions result in patterns

of civil service management that tend to create and reinforce behavior which is in line with these assumptions.

One further point will serve to bring out the richness of problems and possibilities hidden behind the "experts vs. generalists" formulae. We already broke up these two prototypes and recognized the multiplicity of attribute combinations. Now we must add to our overall view of the problem the pluralistic character of modern public administration and its increasing need for both top-level scientific and experience-based knowledge and for top-quality judgment and moral values.

Conventional thinking on the "experts vs. generalists" formulation already recognized that it was a problem not of one or the other, but of the proper relation between them. But clearly the required qualities of public administration cannot be achieved by any mixture of "experts and generalists" in the traditional sense. Only by overcoming this dichotomy not only in discourse, but in action, can we achieve the public administration qualities needed for handling new and difficult problems and for absorbing new very promising and very frightening knowledge under conditions of accelerated social change. We must develop a new breed of top-administrators who are experts in a broad approach and experts in the uses of diverse knowledge, and we must achieve a mix between various types of new professionals and administrators who are equipped for symbiotic team work.

The real question to be faced now (which, in turn, may become obsolescent in the future), is, therefore, not "specialists vs. generalists," but "how to develop new types

of public administration professionals and to achieve a synergetic mix between a large variety of differently qualified persons.<sup>4</sup> This question is more difficult to deal with by sweeping generalizations and simple judgments, but is much more useful for understanding the problems facing public administration and handling them.<sup>5</sup>

FOOTNOTES

1. A recent collection of mainly old papers, most of which accept this misleading dichotomy, is Specialists and Generalists: A Selection of Readings, prepared for the Sub-committee on National Security and International Operations of the Committee on Government Operations, United States Senate (Washington: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1968). This Committee Print became immediately a bestseller and received a lot of sympathetic attention in the media of mass communication. See, for instance, Time, November 29, 1968, p. 14.
2. I am leaving aside the interesting research problem, why does the "specialists vs. generalists" formulation persist so strongly? My impression is that one of its sources of strength is its usefulness as a protective rationalization (in the psychological sense) for resistance against demands for more knowledge and faster professionalization. Insofar as some of these demands are exaggerated, this incorrect question, in fact, may fulfill, in part, useful functions. But those can be better served by a revised and improved view of the desirable roles of different types of knowledge, creativity, experience, and so on in public administration.
3. The term "common sense" also raises a variety of interesting issues. One strict meaning of that term refers to what is supported by the evidence of our ordinary senses - a criterion by which we should reject all modern knowledge in physics, micro-genetics, life-sciences, psychoanalysis and economics; indeed, it seems that one of the signs of advances in knowledge is that it

gets beyond the obvious appearance of phenomena. Another strict meaning of that term may refer to what is accepted by "common" - in some statistical sense - opinions; this clearly is also unsatisfactory for any one with some knowledge of the history of ideas. A third, behaviorally-defined, meaning is that "common sense" is what I think, while "against common sense" is whatever I dislike or reject. The best way out of this maze of contradictory meanings and misleading uses may well be to drop this term altogether.

4. Surprisingly enough, it is this view which was, in part, accepted by a Royal Commission in the country which invented (after the Chinese) the pro-generalist ideology - England. The recent Report of the Committee on the Civil Service (The "Fulton" Report) includes the following, for England quite revolutionary, statement about the generalist (London: HMSO, Cmd. 3638, June, 1968, Vol. 1, p. 11):

"...the Service is still essentially based on the philosophy of the amateur (or "generalist" or "all-rounder"). This is most evident in the Administrative Class which holds the dominant position in the Service. The ideal administrator is still too often seen as the gifted layman who, moving frequently from job to job within the Service, can take a practical view of any problem, irrespective of its subject-matter, in the light of his knowledge and experience of the government machine. Today, as the report of our Management

Consultancy Group illustrates, this concept has most damaging consequences..." (The report of the Management Consultancy Group is reproduced in Volume 2.)

5. For an attempt systematically to work out some of these problems, see my book Public Policymaking Reexamined (San Francisco: Chandler Pub. Co., 1968).