COMMUNICATIONS

MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT: NO LOST WORLD

TO THE EDITOR:

In the June number you publish two somewhat related articles, one by Lawrence J. R. Herson entitled “The Lost World of Municipal Government,” and the other a bibliographical article by R. T. Daland on “Political Science and the Study of Urbanism.” Having read these two offerings with considerable interest, this old-timer in the field of local government feels called upon to make a few comments and a rejoinder, at least in part, on the subject of “The Lost World.”

The bibliographical article has very considerable merit and is likely to be widely useful. While its title suggests that national and state as well as local political problems and publications arising out of urbanism will be brought together, the author in fact mainly emphasizes studies on “urban government,” which comes close to being the same as Herson’s “municipal government.” Thus the two articles supplement each other.

In view of the fact that Dr. Daland went as far back as to James Bryce, Frank Goodnow, and Leo Rowe, I regret that he did not list the important publications of the New York Bureau of Municipal Research in the days of F. A. Cleveland and his co-workers, some of the excellent legislative committee studies in Massachusetts, New York, and California, and the doctoral theses in problems of urbanism and local government that came out of Columbia, Johns Hopkins, and other universities, beginning well before 1900. Some of the best works of American students of local government have appeared in such publications, and in periodicals.

One can agree or disagree with Dr. Daland’s appraisal of the value of what has been published, and concur or not in his judgments as to the gaps in the literature that need to be filled. No one would seriously deny that there are and always have been gaps, or that there are defects in the available materials. Dr. Daland’s criticisms of the deficiencies are directed not so much at the scholars who have made efforts to contribute to knowledge in this field as at political scientists in general for their neglect of the problems of urban government in an age of rapidly advancing urbanism. He tends to be objective, fair, and not harsh in his judgments upon earlier and recent contributors to the field; and he reaches rather optimistic conclusions about the possibilities for the advancement of political science and political theory through future studies in urban politics and government. To him, as to me, municipal government does not seem to be a lost world, but an underdeveloped area in which there are many research opportunities, and many challenges to the research-minded.

Dr. Herson’s article is of another order. It comes from a man who has not, as far as I can ascertain, published any work in municipal government. It is directed not against political scientists in general for having neglected the
field of municipal government, but specifically against those who have worked in the field, and especially at the textbooks some of them have written.

The shortcomings or failings of "the literature of municipal government" are "simply summarized" by the author "by noting that in conceptual construction and in execution, most of the research in this field falls short of the minimal requirements for a systematic political science: for the literature of municipal government is studded with an array of facts that have been gathered with little regard for the construction of general theories; and, at the same time, it is beset with theories that have been advanced without ever being checked against available empirical data" (p. 330).

This is a sweeping indictment, and one is inclined to ask for a bill of particulars and the supporting evidence. Nothing of either kind is forthcoming. Instead the reader is offered two things: a footnote reference to a seven-page "partial evaluation" of "Local Government Research" by Allen Richards in the Public Administration Review (Autumn, 1954); and a footnote on method by the author which is certainly a novelty if not a prodigy in the field of scientific method. I quote (pp. 330-331):

3. A note on method: The concern of this essay is with the "modal characteristics" of a body of literature, not with its specific contributors. Consequently, none of the generalizations affirmed here applies with equal force to any specific text [sic]; moreover, the multiplicity of texts within this field should make it apparent that texts vary in the degree to which they are vulnerable to the criticisms here advanced. Thus, a book such as Charles R. Adrian, Governing Urban America (New York, 1955) is highly conscious of the problems raised here and meets many of them with marked success. Again, a book such as Harold Zink, Government of Cities in the United States (New York, 1948) especially in its treatment of politics makes a significant departure from the general mode. In similar fashion, other books differ in one or more respects, both in the treatment given specific problems, and in the level of sophistication that attends this treatment. In general, however, the similarities of the texts are great enough to warrant a summary presentation that seeks (only) for central characteristics.

Given the concern of this essay for a body of literature, no attempt will be made to deal with the problem of "mean deviation," that is, the degree to which any single text approaches, or diverges from, the characterization made here. And, because this essay seeks only for modal characteristics, it is unnecessary to inject an ad hominem element into the discussion by identifying the sources of specific textbook quotations: Such quotations are offered only to illustrate; certainly not to indict.

In this note and in other parts of his article the author in effect announces that he is going to pass judgment on "a body of literature," without giving the names of the authors, or the titles of the books, or the time period in which they were written; and indeed without even identifying the sources of the passages that he quotes. The reader is evidently expected to accept on faith the author's impressions as to the contents, ideas, and "level of sophistication" of the unnamed books; to accept his competence, carefulness, and fairness in selecting the quoted passages that show the "modal characteristics" of the books; and to agree that he has correctly determined the "modal characteristics" of whatever books he has in mind—and all this in the name of advancing political science!
What the author does is to set up a non-existent something that he calls "the text" or "the city government text," which is based presumably upon the "modal characteristics" of the actual books that lie in the background. Ignoring other parts of the books (and they are substantial), he selects for his mythical text, on some unexplained basis, the "administrative theory," the attitude toward "efficiency," and the position taken on urban politics, as principal determinants of the "modal characteristics" of the books. These determinants appear to be simply the subjects in which he is interested.

Although in this footnote Dr. Herson says he is not making an indictment, the text of his article does just that. Time and again he refers not to his mythical "the text" but to the actual "texts" or "books," although he doesn't name them; and because books don't write themselves, when he refers to their "elitist" tendencies, their "insularity," their ignorance of standards of proof, and so on, he is really referring to the authors. Of course, Dr. Herson assures us, no municipal government text writer in particular is guilty of any specific thing, but every one of them is somehow guilty of a number of things in his list of general charges, in his opinion; and these delicts add up to something very unscientific and very bad. All this without naming any of the disapproved writers, or what they wrote or when they wrote it.

Proceeding by the unscientific method of concealing whatever data he has, and not letting his readers in on the "minimal requirements for a systematic political science" that he is going to apply as standards of judgment, Dr. Herson succeeds not in avoiding the making of an indictment against the textwriters, but in opening himself to the very charges of unscientific procedures and attitudes with which he charges them.

If I were just essay-writing and not in earnest about my criticism of his article, it would be easy enough to use figurative language of the kind Dr. Herson employs and say something on such themes as the beam and the mote, the pot and the kettle, straw men, and people who live in glass houses. I would prefer, however, to have the readers of the REVIEW judge his performance on the basis of his article as a whole, including especially the footnote on method quoted above, the first two paragraphs in part III (pp. 337-38), and perhaps the two top lines on page 341: "the bareness of the evidentiary cupboard stands revealed." In the face of his own serious violation of the principles of scholarship and scientific proof, I do not understand how he can justify his attacks upon the textwriters for what he claims are their errors in scientific method.

One of his charges (p. 338) against the textwriters is that of "one-dimensional analysis" (in italics) and "showing concern for only a single factor in a multifactoral situation." Let us see how this applies to his own essay. He starts off (p. 331) by calling the textbooks the "wellsprings" of "any stream of political science" and proceeds to argue that "it may be that the textbooks of municipal government constitute not so much wellsprings as barriers to the production of systematic research. . . . " I resist comment on this metaphoric transformation. In any case, from here on it is the textbooks and the textbooks alone that are the cause of the alleged failure to develop any contributions to "a systematic
political science” out of the study of municipal government. Could there be a clearer case of seizing upon a single factor or “variable” as the basis for explaining something in the social sciences that may be and probably is a result (if it is true at all) of the operation of many factors?

To me this looks like just another example of something that has happened frequently in the social sciences, of finding a single direct cause and effect relationship between two phenomena because they happen to occur at the same time and in the same place. The two things brought together by Dr. Herson are (a) the textbooks (unnamed) in municipal government, and (b) the failure (alleged but not proved) of research and writing in municipal government to contribute to the development of “a systematic political science” (undefined). As I see it, to establish that (a) is the cause of (b) would require proof not only (1) that Dr. Herson is right about (a)—that the books are all bad, that they deter students from going ahead with research, put them on the wrong track, etc.—but also (2) that he is reasonably correct about (b), which he does not prove, and (3) that there are no other probable causes except (a) to explain (b) if (b) is true. That he persists nevertheless in his emphasis upon the textbooks is evidenced by the fact that near the end he outlines the contents of an ideal textbook that would presumably save the world of municipal government from being permanently lost.

As to the alleged failure of men working in the field of municipal government to contribute significantly to a systematic political science, should it not have occurred to him that this failure, and the alleged defects in the textbooks these men wrote, probably stemmed from the same combination of causes? Or, in short, that the defects in the texts were primarily evidences of some more deep-seated difficulties? To raise the textbooks up into prime causes seems to me to be dubious, indeed, and to make them sole causes quite indefensible. There have probably been defective textbooks in every field of knowledge, but research has gone on just the same.

If time and space permitted I could write something about the difficulties of getting research done in the local government field during the past thirty or forty years. Dr. Herson speaks of the opportunities for comparative government research among 16,000 municipal governments, and Dr. Daland (p. 509) speaks with some enthusiasm of “a vast untapped reservoir for the study of political theory” in the “hundred thousand experiments in the design and operation of political institutions ... currently in progress ...” in cities, towns, districts, and authorities. This is fine. But every place is a different one, every experiment different, and one man is only one man in one place at one time. Even today it is impossible even to scratch the surface, or to get support for much serious and comprehensive work, because real research in local politics and government is almost prohibitively expensive and time consuming.

And how much greater the obstacles were not more than a few decades ago! A very small number of teachers, loaded with other duties, who specialized to some extent in urban government, mostly in the big city universities, called upon time and again for practical service and advice by local authorities,
without adequate research funds, time, or staff, with only the meagerest of statistical and other information available, with very little support or stimulation from contemporary scholars in economics, sociology, psychology, and history, with those fields little more advanced in ideas than political science—I will not go on! These are some of the factors Dr. Herson might have thought about as causative factors for what he thinks is wrong instead of concentrating on the textbooks. He might even have found something to praise.

There are so many things in his article with which I cannot agree that I simply must not go on to try to discuss them all. My present copy of the Review is so marked up with questions that I must order a fresh copy. But a few of his criticisms of the textbooks cannot go unnoted. One of his charges is that "the urban political process being described in today's city government text is a picture seen through the eyes of Graham Wallas, Lincoln Steffens and James Bryce, rather than a view that might come from contemporaries such as Lubell, Riesman, Hunter, Key or Truman." Since he does not give us the citations of the "today's" texts he is attacking, I turn to Dr. Daland's article for a fairly good list (p. 494). Skipping the very early ones of Goodnow, Fairlie, Rowe, and Zueblin, we have the following texts with dates for various editions:

- Charles Beard, 1912
- William B. Munro, various texts, 1912, 1915, 1916, 1923, 1926, 1929, 1934
- Chester C. Maxey, 1924, 1929
- William Anderson, 1925; revised with Edward W. Weidner, 1950
- Thomas H. Reed, 1926, 1934
- Chester A. Hanford, 1926
- Charles M. Kneier, 1934, 1947
- Harold Zink, 1939, 1948
- Stuart MacCorkle, 1942
- Ernest B. Schuls, 1949
- Arthur Bromage, 1950
- Fisher and Bishop, 1950
- Charles R. Adrian, 1955

In this list only one new book and one new edition of an older book have been published since 1951.

These texts are, I presume, the ones whose writers should have paid attention to Lubell, Riesman, et al. The books by these men (and here our author does give us names and dates, note 6, p. 332) were published as follows:

- Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, 1950
- Hunter, *Community Power Structure*, 1953
- Truman, *The Governmental Process*, 1951
- Key, *Politics, Parties and Pressure Groups*, 2d ed. 1947
- Key, *American State Politics*, 1956

A little better sense of timing would have been helpful at this point. Can Dr. Herson inform us how the writers or revisers of the Municipal Government texts published in 1950, or even 1951, and earlier years back to 1912, could possibly have used the books of Lubell, Riesman, Hunter or Truman, or the last one by Key, all published in 1950 or later?
Even if he were not completely wrong in suggesting that the textwriters should have included something in their texts from books not yet published, doesn't he in effect imply that every time a new book on politics appears in print, the writers of texts should immediately accept it as established in truth and in science, and make use of its findings, instead of using their independent judgment in the matter? I understand that there is considerable disagreement about the scientific value of at least one of the books he lists, and the pertinence or value of any one of them for a municipal government course is surely debatable.

The treatment he gives to the textbook discussions of "efficiency" also calls for brief comment. I find him to be very confusing on this point. He talks about a "value-free administrative process" and "the idea of a value-free efficiency" (p. 334) as if they are concepts common to and fully accepted by the writers on municipal government. I must confess that some of these writers have not been sufficiently clear and specific in stating the "values" that they hold and for which they work. Anyone who knows them, however, and who knows the ideals generally held by American political scientists should have no reason to be in doubt. I am sure that to the writers the values were not "half-hidden" (p. 335). Most of them (and I think all) hold the general view that government is an instrument or device of the people for promoting their own security and the moral and material welfare of mankind. When the writers speak of "efficiency" in government they have in mind the principle of stewardship, that a public office is a public trust, however old-fashioned that may sound, and that the resources made available to the public authorities by the people should be so used as to obtain the maximum benefit for the people, in moral, intellectual, material, and every other way. Efficiency in this sense never was and never can be value-free. It is never divorced from choices as to policy, either; but the fact that "efficiency" in a quite different sense could be claimed by Nazi and Fascist regimes should not mislead us. It is efficiency in the American sense and for American democratic ends that is being discussed. In this American sense efficiency as a practical aim is a noble concept of all the different ways of achieving intelligence, honesty and effectiveness in promoting the general welfare, without undue waste of the mental and physical labors of men and women, or of the natural and other resources. To say that the "efficiency" test is purely financial is inaccurate, but even if it rose no higher than that it could be defended as a value.

"B.L.T." (Bert Leston Taylor), the widely read quipster-columnist of "the world's greatest newspaper" a generation ago, once printed a classification of college studies made up by college students on a highbrow-lowbrow basis. There were "high" highbrow subjects like aesthetics and the poetry of Swinburne, "low" highbrow subjects, "high" lowbrow subjects and "low" lowbrow subjects. As I recall it, the best municipal government could do was to gain a "high" lowbrow rating. I am certain the teachers of municipal government in the country at that time (and there were not very many of them) accepted the classification in good spirit and went on about their work.

The basis of the classification was, as far as I could ascertain, the practical
usefulness of each subject. The more practical, the more lowbrow. It is my belief, based upon a fairly wide acquaintance with the men in the field, that the teachers of municipal government in general have always taken a deeply practical interest in the subject. Living in communities that were confronted with many problems of government, planning, financing and administration, and confronted by a continuous inflow of students wanting to know about what could be done to improve government locally and in the state, and by citizen leaders who asked for help on urgent state and community problems, they in general willingly combined their teaching, research, and citizenly duties in the local field. They studied and wrote about local problems, and spoke to local groups, worked on local committees, and brought all this experience and more to their students in the classroom. I doubt that many of them ever thought of these activities as contributing much to “a systematic political science,” but I know that their work did a great deal to bring a sense of realism and practicality into the classroom and to bring intelligence into the discussion of local problems. They helped also to improve the relations of the colleges with their communities and to show the practical usefulness in at least one direction of the study of political science. And while these teachers devoted time to such activities, others in their departments could devote their efforts to the more “highbrow” and less utilitarian courses.

These teachers of municipal government were not remiss, either, in their attempts to increase and improve knowledge in their fields. They were mostly industrious, intelligent, and realistic, but they were relatively few. What their younger critics of today need to realize more fully than some seem to, is the set of conditions under which men of a generation or more ago, or even more recently, had to work in developing the fields of local and even state government at all. But I have already said something on that subject.

There are grounds for fair criticism of the work being done in any and every field of learning and science. There is need for such criticism, continuous criticism, if knowledge is to be improved and advanced. Even more, there is need for men to undertake substantive research of their own, because it is the substantive contributions that really add to the body of knowledge. Mere criticism of what others are doing is not enough.

The field of municipal government, or urban government, is one in which there is, in my opinion, urgent need for more workers than there ever have been before. Urban concentration of population is advancing rapidly. It is changing the nature of politics not only in the urban places but throughout the states, the nation and the world. Studies in the urban field need to be made with all the energy, all the wisdom, all the scientific sophistication, and all the regard for human well-being that we can muster, so that political science as a whole can be advanced for the benefit of mankind. And there is evidence that increasingly large resources are being made available for such studies. The field is open to all, but the work will not be easy.

In my judgment, the study of municipal government is not a lost world, even
though it is overshadowed to some extent by current interests in other fields. As to Dr. Herson’s essay I would say:

Method unsatisfactory.
Charges not proved.
Municipal government no lost world.

WILLIAM ANDERSON

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A REPLY TO WILLIAM ANDERSON

TO THE EDITOR:

So far as I can see, Professor Anderson’s objections turn on the following points:

1. That I have not previously published any work in municipal government. This is true; but I trust that the merits of argument may rest on other grounds.

2. That I have failed to specify the textbooks I treat and that I have been selective in my concerns. Again, true; but I wrote an essay (as the footnote which Professor Anderson was kind enough to quote makes clear) concerned not with any single book, but only with deficiencies common to nearly all of them. Within the compass of any essay, sharp selectivity is inescapable; but my focus upon topics I deemed most important (e.g., administrative theory) ought to be construed not as a lack of concern for other things. Rather, it was a necessary surrender to the demands of orderly presentation.

3. That mere or negative criticism is not enough. True again; but is there to be no room in our literature for a “first examination”? And is there to be no room in our scholarly journals for a “loyal opposition”?

4. That I impute to the textbooks on municipal government sole responsibility for inadequate research in that field. This, I think, is a misunderstanding. I wrote in my essay that I offer “one explanation” for the state of this research, and further, that the textbooks “orient and guide” research in this field. To speak of an orienting force is not the same as referring to a sole determining force. To speak of offering one explanation presumably implies that others are to be found and that they might be fruitfully explored. But my language there is perhaps not as clear as I should have liked it to be; and if my words be read as Professor Anderson chooses to read them, I will not cavil at his criticism.

5. That I curiously expect authors to incorporate into their textbooks, the findings of later books. My point here is twofold. First, these later books were cited “to suggest” alternative approaches to the study of city government. These books had precursors (presumably known to the textbook writers) that might equally be cited. But since the purpose of an example is to evoke the richest response within the shortest compass, I chose to cite the later, and presumably more widely known, studies. Second, and more important, the content of these later books (as of their precursors) was based on facts already...