

Amadea Bata-Balog

BOOK REVIEW: *THE 21ST CENTURY PUBLIC MANAGER* BY ZEGER VAN DER WAL¹

Amadea Bata-Balog, PhD student, University of Public Service, Doctoral School of Public Administration Sciences; research assistant and project manager, Oriental Business and Innovation Center (OBIC), Budapest Business School, Bata-Balog.Amadea@uni-nke.hu

Zeger van der Wal's latest book entitled "The 21st Century Public Manager: Challenges, People and Strategies" published in 2017 is in many ways a unique and milestone work, truly global in scope and ambition, both in its mapping of the complex 21st century landscape of public administration, and in offering a clear perspective for practitioners, while also inspiring them on their journeys. Along these lines, the value of the book is in its basic premise that "public management matters" and that of the demanding rethinking of the roles, responsibilities, skills and strategies of purposeful public servants while navigating in the ever-changing VUCA world – one characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The book was intended to serve as a practical manual and indeed is an extremely useful guide, being an asset for professionals, students and educators who wish to follow a logical framework in understanding contemporary public policy challenges.

KEYWORDS:

global megatrends, public administration, public policy, public servants, VUCA world

¹ Zeger van der Wal, *The 21st Century Public Manager: Challenges, People and Strategies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

In our contemporary globalised world, when a serious pandemic can actually shut down the whole world for almost a year now (Covid-19), when one of the most determining members of the European Union leaves the integration beyond recall (Brexit), or when facing the most complicated openings to a new administration in modern history with regard to the United States – just to mention a few defining events – it can be stated that we have entered a new era full of unexpectedness. This unpredictable nature of the VUCA² world at stake – characterised by *volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity* – presents profound challenges for many policymakers and public managers across the globe. As a matter of fact, public administration, its role and tasks, have always been changing with age, related to economic, social, political and cultural characteristics, the goals of governance, consistently facing internal and external challenges, going along with global trends (as economic interconnectedness, demographic changes, digital deluge, climate change) and pervasive public problems of the 21st century.³

Defining the concept of public administration is not an easy task, since there is no approach, method or discipline with which a notion for public administration could be developed – not even at the level of conceptual abstraction – that meets the need for completeness⁴. Nor it is effortless to describe public managers themselves, who should be prepared and respond to an ever-changing world which is fertile with disruptions and complications. However, Zeger van der Wal took the effort to expand the horizon on such an intriguing topic as *The 21st Century Public Manager* and how to get along in such a challenging environment.

The highly acclaimed author, Zeger van der Wal is an Assistant Dean (Research) and Associate Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore, a researcher, a Global Public Management Expert and a widely recognised lecturer having extensive experience in executive education. This is why he also intended his book to be valued as a practitioner-oriented teaching text that apart from being addressed to those aspiring public managers who aim to invest more in their work or want to look for some motivation, is also for students enrolled in public administration or public management courses, who are interested in knowing more or becoming a good 21st century public manager. *The 21st Century Public Manager* was published by Palgrave Macmillan in the framework of *The Public Management and Leadership Series* in April 2017. The state-of-the-art edition has received positive accolades in newspapers and top journals in the field, and widespread international attention from the U.S. to India, Korea, Russia, Australia, China and the Netherlands; and has been translated into Arabic, Chinese and Mongolian – unfortunately not (yet) into Hungarian.

² VUCA is an acronym, first used in 1987, already in connection with leadership theories of Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus. From the beginning of the 2000s, it has subsequently taken root in emerging ideas in the field of management and strategic leadership.

³ Rosamond Hutt, 'What are the 10 biggest global challenges?' *World Economic Forum*, 21 January 2016.

⁴ András Patyi, *A közigazgatási működés jogi alapjai. A magyar közigazgatás és közigazgatási jog általános tanai* (Budapest: Dialóg Campus, 2017).

Van der Wal's accessible and readable book serves as a practical manual and an extremely useful guide to navigate the complex world of public management. A central argument of the book is that a successful public manager of the 21st century – not using the VUCA world as an excuse – can turn emerging challenges into immense opportunities for public value creation. Thus in order to do so, van der Wal provides public managers with a set of tools and a mindset to address this new era. He is convinced that 'public management matters'⁵ and that the work of public servants is decisive in the creation of good government.

The structure and content of the book are embedded in a logical framework which is clearly outlined in the beginning of the edition. The author structured his work in twelve chapters, covering 201 pages, which are followed by an all-inclusive bibliography. Already when reading the *Introduction* of the book, it becomes apparent for the reader that this volume will not only be intellectually satisfying, but inspiring at the same time, as van der Wal is passionate in delivering information about who public managers really are and how they strive to manage and navigate in a VUCA world.

The second chapter provides a critical overview of *Traditional* versus *New* roles, skills, competencies and values for public managers. In order to accomplish this, it offers a historical retrospective – nevertheless, not returning to the medieval times of China or India, but – to the first half of the 20th century, crediting the founding father of public administration as Max Weber, who cultivated the traditional, rule-oriented bureaucratic type of public manager. The chapter then goes on to show how public managers have developed into 'businesslike', performance-focused managers, and finally to networking, relation-focused collaborators. If you were having some doubts of the latest trends, you are not wrong if you realise that these types or models, and the 'administrative craftsmanship of 1.0, 2.0, 3.0'⁶ are actually combined in an effective and successful 21st century manager. Apart from utilising the right toolbox with skills, 21st century public managers 'need to operate on the basis of the right values and motivations which, taken together, constitute a so-called public service ethos'.⁷ But how will the emergence of a VUCA world affect these values and motivations? Along these lines, the chapter joins to a bright number of recent scholarly articles, books, consultancy reports and government documents discussing the future public sector workforce as an essential means for good governance, but this edition is exceptional in raising questions that are especially practitioner-oriented.

The third chapter identifies the *Trends and Drivers* of global megatrends, hypes and shocks that impact managerial operating environments, highlighting the eight most decisive ones, such as those that concern individuals, the global economy, and those that are in relation to the physical environment. All tightly relate to one another. First of all, it was the rapid 1. technological evolution that changed the world completely and increased

⁵ Van der Wal, *The 21st Century Public Manager*, xiv.

⁶ Ibid. 12. Citing Paul t' Hart, *Ambtelijk Vakmanschap 3.0. De zoektocht naar het handwerk van de overheidsmanager* (The Hague: VOM, 2014).

⁷ Ibid. 20. Citing: Rayner et al. 'Organizational citizenship behavior and the public service ethos: Whither the organization?', *Journal of Business Ethics* 106, no 2 (2012), 117–130.

the availability of data and information that coupled with an increasingly empowered and educated population, which resulted in 2. great expectations from governments and strong demands for transparency. Such dynamics fundamentally have changed the practices of public administration, which was further challenged by 3. demographic changes, as well as population moves. 4. Economic interconnectedness is beyond doubt, which largely determines the economic and policy agenda of international and domestic governance actors. Meanwhile, the massive growth of 5. public debt and subsequent fiscal pressures have come to be one of the most profound public sector trends in the developed world, which additionally has seen 6. global power shifts with developing countries coming into the scene, especially with the start of the ‘Asian century and the – truly – multipolar world’. As a result of the ever-increasing 7. urbanisation phenomenon, megacities appear as ‘nodes of growth and governance’ raising as many threats as opportunities. As a downside of the aforementioned trends, 8. climate change and resource stress, which although is a popular topic of recent discussions, is still far away from many countries’ interests and policy agendas.

The following chapter builds upon these megatrends impacting public administration, translating them into seven *Demands, Dilemmas and Opportunities*. What the author makes clear through a lifelike example is that public managers of today and the future are faced with a ‘cascade of multi-faceted and contradictory demands which, in turn, result in complex public management dilemmas’.⁸ Apart from being aware that not all demands and dilemmas are unfamiliar or new in their nature, but in fact are a result of the round-about 21st century trends and drivers, many are distinct and inexperienced yet. The key question is to what extent public servants of this age can manage these demands and dilemmas in a way to transform them into opportunities – if possible. After giving a short foreword on each cluster of managerial demands identified by Van der Wal, he then offers strategies and tools for practitioners, discussing the roles, attributes and competencies that they need in order to handle and dominate these challenges day by day during their work. Chapter 5 to 11 are structured around these seven critical demands according to the following: *Managing Stakeholder Multiplicity, Managing Authority Turbulence, Managing the New Work(force), Managing Innovation Forces, Managing Ethical Complexities, Managing Short Versus Long Time Horizons* and *Managing Cross-sectoral Collaboration*.

Without spoiling the main ideas of these chapters, it must be noted that each are very detailed in elaborating on the diverse challenges current and future public managers have to tackle. When it comes to *Managing Stakeholder Multiplicity*, it is realised that due to emerging and interconnected megatrends, more and more public issues require building collaborations or networks with the engagement of public, private and non-profit organisations. With more and more stakeholders getting involved, solving public problems eventually become more complicated due to such concerns as responsibility and

⁸ Ibid. 39.

accountability.⁹ Communication and networking with these stakeholders is not an easy job for any public manager, thus one needs good framing and branding strategies, while social media-literacy has also been recognised as a necessary means for problem solving and management.

Another confronting task in public administration is *Managing Authority Turbulence*, which originates from the fact that there has been a decline in respect for traditional authority, arising with scepticism over expertise by the vocal public which consumes often exaggerated social media (with fake news) – all making legitimacy rather consequential than self-evident.¹⁰ Reading this chapter, a practitioner will develop a good sense of the causes and manifestations of the phenomenon of authority ‘shock’ and will learn eight managerial responses, such as mastering political astuteness, maintaining institutional continuity and policy consistency or advocating collaborative leadership, among others. However, implementing these strategies, with the wave of retirement of senior managers, is challenging to deal with as younger generations of employees entering the labour market that is confused with new forms of work and new types of workplaces. The manifestation of the challenges of *Managing the New Work(force)* – versatile, unpredictable and boundless career paths of Generation Y, a diverse workforce, computerisation and robotisation or the disappearance of traditional job security – are all over, but the chapter does not hold back the opportunities of these currents, additionally, it goes into HRM issues, too.

As a cause and as a consequence of the megatrends discussed before, innovation sooner or later appears in the field of public administration. Either because it is indeed needed or it is pressured into practice. The question is how public managers choose to respond, whether they can overcome traditional public sector barriers to renew and experiment or if they choose to stay with traditional practices if public values are believed to be lost via ‘disruptive’ innovation. (Is innovation always ‘good’?) Either way, according to *Managing Innovation Forces* and its stages effectively, van der Wal argues that public managers should ‘change the way they think, operate, respond, facilitate, and produce’.¹¹

A variety of ethical dilemmas alongside competing values and obligations make public managers sleepless at night. 21st century public managers are expected to be skilled at *Managing Ethical Complexities* in a way that they must operate both ethically – good – and effectively – well.¹² After identifying the types of unethical behaviours, key managerial areas are described, one of which is the determination of political-administrative boundaries. Supposing that public servants are/should be separate from the political domain while serving the public interest,¹³ it often proves to be difficult, or sometimes even impossible to

⁹ Denhardt et al., *Public Administration: An Action Orientation* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2014).

¹⁰ Van der Wal, *The 21st Century Public Manager*, 68. Citing: Mark C Suchman, ‘Managing legitimacy: Strategic and institutional approaches’, *Academy of Management Review* 20, no 3 (1995), 571–610.

¹¹ Ibid. 107. Citing: Cat Tully, ‘Stewardship of the Future Using Strategic Foresight in 21st Century Governance’, *UNDP Global Centre for Public Service Excellence*, 2015, 4–5.

¹² Gjalt de Graaf and Zeger van der Wal, ‘Managing conflicting public values: Governing with integrity and effectiveness’, *The American Review of Public Administration* 40, no 6 (2010), 623–630.

¹³ Woodrow Wilson, ‘The study of administration’, *Political Science Quarterly* 2, (1887), 197–222.

remain apolitical eternally while getting things done. This consideration is not a newborn issue, while for instance the rise of big data, a game-changing phenomenon creating the concern of privacy violations, has recently been rapidly advancing.

Avoiding to meet only short-term pressures and demands, (most of the cases in relation to election cycles,) pressing megatrends – such as demographic changes, urbanisation or climate change – necessitate that public managers plan ahead in order to mitigate possible fiscal, demographic and environmental pressures. The remainder of this chapter gives an idea on how foresight methods and resilient systems can support practitioners in public administration with *Managing Short Versus Long Time Horizons*, which is another high-priority 21st century demand.

The seventh and final managerial demand, defined in Chapter 11 – *Managing Cross-sectoral Collaboration* – is an issue that has been raised time after time in the previous chapters, but here it gets more attention and justification. Key drivers are outlined for engaging in collaborative practices and arrangements with partners and partnerships (for example, PPPs), demonstrating collaborative behaviour with non-state actors (often especially citizens), – ranging from leveraging outside expertise or financial resources to empowering citizens – and the challenges and opportunities that each of these drivers presents. Collaborative partnerships, although presenting considerable challenges to public managers, in fact, can ‘yield the largest potential benefits for solving super-wicked problems’.¹⁴

After concluding the analysis on specific demands for public managers that originate from the VUCA world, the closing chapter synthesises the key observations of the resourceful author on the ideal profile of *The 21st Century Public Manager*. Van der Wal, being aware of socio-economic and cultural differences of public administration, understands that the universalism of such a profile is critical. However, the overall, global trends featured in this book all point towards the urge for public managers to become smart, savvy, astute and entrepreneurial while maintaining a strong public service ethos, collaborative and connected yet authoritative in content and style, an active anticipator of what matters now as well as in the future, and a generalist-specialist who never stops learning.¹⁵

A remarkable strength of this book is that it is truly international in scope with regards to the scene of public administration. It acknowledges that while ‘public servants are united in their calling to serve the public’¹⁶ they experience different challenges while operating in diverse contexts and circumstances depending on which part of the world they live. On the other hand, though, it is unavoidable to realise that economic interconnectedness, combined with technological developments, ensure that ‘public administration is no longer

¹⁴ Van der Wal, *The 21st Century Public Manager*, 177.

¹⁵ Also see Zeger van der Wal, ‘Five key characteristics of the 21st century public manager’.

¹⁶ Assel Mussagulova, ‘The Twenty-First-Century Public Servant: A Developing Country Perspective’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of the Public Servant*, ed. by Helen Sullivan, Helen Dickinson and Hayley Henderson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

bound by national borders, as the traditional definition of the field has implied'.¹⁷ Since the international dimensions of public administration are more important than ever, and eventually 'all public management work will internationalize and globalize in the decades to come',¹⁸ van der Wal shows different viewpoints, issues and practices from all around the world – case studies from the developed and developing world, from the U.K. to China, Sweden to India, and even Hungary.

For a better understanding, the book provides boxes and illustrative materials (tables, figures) as well as dozens of references, granting that the work is based on extensive theoretical background and a remarkable literature overview. Beyond accurate citations, the author adduces conversations with a number of officials, interviews with public leaders and managers, together with bringing plenty of real-life examples to support his points, which all make the concepts and problems come alive and easy to relate to, and frame the analysis more credibly. Van der Wal's engaging style of writing makes *The 21st Century Public Manager* a highly valuable read that should be in the collection of all those who wish to follow a logical framework in understanding contemporary public policy challenges. This book, however, is especially recommended to students and educators as educational material in public administration programs. Indeed, the transfer of knowledge and 'best practice' in the field of public administration is of utmost importance as it is linked to public sector performance and national competitiveness.¹⁹

With unprecedented challenges ahead, government officials and political leaders are driven to find new and innovative ways to tackle long-standing matters.²⁰ In order to do so, an equipped public managerial team is needed, who must rethink their roles, responsibilities, skills, strategies and values while contending with the VUCA world. Certainly, 'we are about to see significant changes both to what public servants do and the ways in which they do it'.²¹ Zeger van der Wal's latest edition is in many ways a unique and milestone work, both in its mapping of the complex 21st century landscape of public administration, and in offering a clear perspective for practitioners, while also inspiring them on their journeys.

¹⁷ Denhardt et al., *Public Administration*.

¹⁸ Van der Wal, *The 21st Century Public Manager*, 34.

¹⁹ Norbert Kis and András Nemeslaki, 'Comprehensive HR development in the public sector: The case of National University of Public Service as an innovative institutional framework' in *Government vs. Governance in Central and Eastern Europe: From Pre-Weberianism to Neo-Weberianism?* 22nd NISPAcee Annual Conference, 2014.

²⁰ Robert P Beschel, Blair James Cameron, Jana Kunicova and Bernard C Myers, 'Improving Public Sector Performance: Through Innovation and Inter-Agency Coordination', *The World Bank, Global Report – Public Sector Performance*, October 2018.

²¹ Helen Dickinson and Helen Sullivan, *Imagining the 21st Century Public Service Workforce* (Melbourne School of Government: University of Melbourne, October 2014).

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Amadea Bata-Balog is a PhD student at the University of Public Service, Doctoral School of Public Administration Sciences, in Budapest, since 2019. Her research field concerns international migration. Her focus is on Latin American migration processes in modern history and related public policies and their challenges in the face of mass emigration, immigration, as well as return movements. As of her previous studies, she holds a bachelor (BA) degree in Sociology obtained at the Pázmány Péter Catholic University, and an English language master's degree (MA) in International Relations, graduating from the Budapest Business School, University of Applied Sciences. Besides her doctoral studies, currently she is working as a Research Assistant and Project Manager at the Oriental Business and Innovation Center (OBIC), Budapest Business School.

