

A précis on political theory and emergency management

Richard T. Sylves, PhD

ABSTRACT

This article is a short overview of political and public management theory in emergency management. The work applies the dichotomous public management theories of Jefferson and Hamilton to emergency management. The establishment of emergency management as a profession, the bureaucratic politics of the field, principal agent theory, and codification/diffusion of knowledge are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

A good way to explore how political theory contributes to the study and application of emergency management is to consider its contributions to organization studies and theories of public management. This paper is a short overview of public management-related political theory that may be of help to academics, students, and practitioners interested in the academic aspects of emergency management. The core of this discussion is based on *Public Management as Art, Science, and Profession*, by Laurence E. Lynn, Jr.¹ Lynn's book does not address emergency management directly, but its treatise is immediately relevant to emergency management because it examines critical questions about "public" management in general.

JEFFERSONIANS AND HAMILTONIANS

Let's examine two simple normative political theories to start. Consider a subset of the political theories of two of America's forefathers: Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. Jefferson, major author of the Declaration of Independence and the nation's third president, has been generally understood to insist that the job of public managers was to obtain "popular and stakeholder guidance" through political consultation or public deliberation before the fact. In

other words, public managers make their decisions as the product of grassroots public consultation and the consensus of interest group recommendations. This gives a public manager's decisions greater legitimacy for public purposes. This so-called Jeffersonian approach requires that public managers possess skills in consultation, negotiation, and communication and deftness in probing for public understanding and consent. Good Jeffersonian public managers are educated generalists ("gentlemen," as Jefferson might have put it) who know and understand the personal relationship that exists between agents and tasks. Jeffersonian public managers are strictly accountable to the public and to their elected overseers.

For Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, a significant contributor to *The Federalist Papers* and a major architect of the US Constitution, public management needed to emphasize getting results. So-called Hamiltonian public managers expect others, especially strong elected executives, to judge them by whether or not their efforts produced the desired effect. They work under "after the fact" accountability, and their concerns are performance and evaluation under public law. Hamiltonians must be expert decision makers and students of organization and must possess executive talents in formulating plans and carrying out duties. Hamiltonian public managers know the substance, tools, and processes of their work. A Hamiltonian public manager is, in many ways, a technocrat who possesses special knowledge and expertise most average citizens do not have and who works under norms of objectivity and political neutrality. The rise of a professional US civil service system of government in the 1920s and its perpetuation today demands

well-educated public managers. Moreover, the complexity and vast array of public problems and governmental responsibilities demands managers who possess specialized knowledge and technical abilities.

In the course of their work, emergency managers cannot simultaneously behave as both good Jeffersonians and good Hamiltonians. The two theories point to two fundamentally different ways to approach public management. Though the two theories may be compatible in some rare circumstances, they ordinarily stand in basic counterpoint to one another. Emergency managers need to understand the difference between these theories and understand that they may often have to choose one or the other to work effectively. If they understand these theories, they will be empowered to make more informed decisions in the course of their work.

POLITICAL THEORY AND PROFESSION

What is a profession? A profession is an occupation that is esoteric, complex, and discretionary. It requires theoretical knowledge, skill, and judgment that others either do not possess or cannot easily comprehend. Theory-grounded knowledge is the basis of most professions. Professions occupy a position of legal and political privilege that protects them from competing professions.² Professions sanction theory and application, something emergency managers must fully appreciate.

Once a person masters the abstractions and methodologies of a profession, he or she enjoys more autonomy in the work he or she does. To enter a profession, education and training in a professional program are needed to achieve mastery of the necessary abstract concepts. Alexander Hamilton would favor a government management workforce staffed largely by professionals.

Professions often rely on universities and colleges to educate and train skilled staff, since people at these institutions are experts at imparting abstract knowledge. Professionals in most careers must have suitable credentials to compete, and universities or colleges are able to convey these credentials. Some professions draw status from their clients. However, the range of clients for physicians, lawyers, and emergency managers, for example, is so broad that the

status of these professions cannot reasonably be related to the status of the many client groups they serve.

Disputes regarding who may officially accredit emergency management education programs and who may certify people as qualified emergency managers will profoundly affect whether and how emergency management evolves as a profession.³ Theories and concepts are engines of knowledge creation, but in emergency management, the matters of developing and testing theories and deciding what constitutes knowledge may well be determined by the authorities and interests that win accrediting and certification powers.

Why is abstract thought important in a profession? Abstract reasoning produces measurable, generalizable knowledge that can be validated in many contexts. In other words, generalized knowledge has explanatory power across a wide variety of cases and circumstances. Abstraction and generalized knowledge help researchers transcend single case studies to see how they apply in the wider world. Abstraction enhances the value of experiential learning by enabling those with field experience to collect empirical evidence amenable to analysis by themselves and by others, most particularly those working to add predictive power to the theories they test and develop. Abstraction provides a basis for improved qualitative and quantitative examinations of social and physical phenomena, including catastrophic events. Abstract reasoning facilitates the coproduction and exchange of knowledge between people of different scientific disciplines, which is essential in emergency management work.

Is emergency management evolving as a profession? Tierney, Lindell, and Perry⁴ think it is. Waugh, Sylves, and others⁵ concur and have explored this question at length, as have Drabek et al.⁶ If those working in this field succeed in establishing their work as a profession, they have to do so by building on and enriching the theory that applies to it. Lack of theory or weak theory undercuts emergency management's authority and contributes to its marginalization—something dangerous in an era of occupational competition from the realm of homeland security. Emergency management as a field achieves greater legitimacy when its core concepts have currency in the physical and social sciences. Conversely, physical

and social scientists are likely to contribute to the theory and conceptual growth of emergency management and disaster studies if they conclude that this is a knowledge-driven, research-supportive realm.

If emergency management becomes a serious profession, it would be reasonable to expect that the recommendations of emergency managers to top government officials would be respected and acted upon, owing both to the merit of the recommendations themselves and because the recommendations were made by those with acknowledged expertise. If political officials do not consider emergency managers as part of a specialized, knowledge-based profession, they might conclude that their own judgments are as valid as those of emergency managers.⁷ In other words, emergency managers would lack “authority of expertise.” Emergency management would be seen as a body of unsophisticated skill sets imparted to others through simple, one-directional training. Worse still, it might reasonably be assumed that anyone could perform emergency management tasks because the field is so ill-defined or based on easily learned behaviors. Emergency managers would be viewed as interchangeable functionaries carrying out relatively simple tasks with clerk-like efficiency during disaster intervals.

This conceptualization may appeal to Jeffersonians because it rests on simplification, facilitates mobilization and participation of unskilled volunteers, and maximizes political control and grassroots political responsiveness. However, for Jeffersonians, there is not much use for emergency managers between disasters. They have no role in mitigating disasters in a sophisticated way and are neither well-suited to address the causes of disaster nor likely to understand the complex, multifaceted ramifications of disasters and emergencies.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT THEORY AND BUREAUCRATIC POLITICS

Study of bureaucratic politics can also be applied to emergency management theory. According to Hugh Hecl,⁸ political administration is “office-using by people in a variety of circumstances at the top of the executive branch of government.” Statecraft is “using and risking

political power through action,” i.e., political leadership times bureaucratic power. Bureaucratic politics are conducted quietly and skillfully behind the scenes, with possible strategic reversals, caution, and contentment with sharing credit for good results. A person needs these attributes in order to conduct good statecraft.

Some scholars of public management and bureaucratic politics impart knowledge by observing and recounting field experiences and try to produce applicable principles, referred to as “best practices,” based on those observations. Chester Barnard⁹ is the exemplar of the best practice approach. He sees practice as the basis for scholarship rather than scholarship as the basis for practice; the practitioner draws the picture for the observer. James Lee Witt’s book about his experiences directing FEMA provide a perfect example of this approach.¹⁰

Another set of scholars creates knowledge based on empirical validation of useful propositions derived from models. Simon et al.’s *Public Administration*¹¹ and Graham Allison’s *Essence of Decisions*¹² epitomize this social scientific approach. They see scholarship as a basis for practice, also known as the “applied heuristics” (seeking solutions by trial and error) approach. Analytical approaches and models were the early basis of policy analysis. They allow for experimentation, help public managers deal with “messy” realities, and help public managers produce adequate explanations for puzzling things. When applied to particular situations, they offer reasonable insights that improve a manager’s effectiveness.

To summarize, those using reductive approaches seek support from practitioners while those using analytical approaches seek support from academics. “Best practice” reductionist views of public management have been criticized because they are often not good guides to scholarship, teaching, or practice. However, according to Lynn,¹ some case studies, especially those showing how public executives shape the institutional frameworks for policymaking and execution, have been useful contributions to theory knowledge. Executives shape the contexts that affect public policy in both the short and long run.

Within the subfields of the physical and social sciences (e.g., meteorology, seismology, sociology,

policy studies, epidemiology, emergency medicine, engineering, et al.), there is an incredible range of analytical approaches to the study of disaster. Those advancing the analytical approach to the study of disaster have benefited from advances in high-powered computing and the development of sophisticated software programs (e.g., computer-based data analysis, Geographical Information Systems, HAZUS, etc.).¹³ Emergency managers and students of emergency management must embrace analytic approaches and tools in order to advance disaster study and research.

However, the generalization sought by analytical approaches overlooks the principle of reality as a social construct rather than an objective construct that is the same for all observers. Some scholars working in the disciplines of sociology or political philosophy maintain that organizations, including government organizations, are systems of socially constructed and cognitively ordered meanings.¹⁴ Empiricism, which is the collection of information about the physical and social “real” world, and which is so essential to analytical approaches, loses out if social constructionists routinely discount empirical, scientific information as merely the product of individual interpretations of reality and personal belief systems.

Today, constructivist theory is widely popular in many academic realms, including disaster sociology.¹⁵ This author is not advocating the dismissal of social constructionist research, because it has an important place in the intellectual sphere of emergency management. However, social constructionism and its variants do not represent the only intellectual paradigm applicable to emergency management. Several alternative theories and paradigms, some facilitating links between the physical and social sciences, are of more practical use to emergency managers than is social constructionism.

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AND PRINCIPAL-AGENT THEORY

Principal-agent theory assumes that managers have no way to observe whether their agents (subordinates) carried out the instructions they issued as principals. In addition, agents may hide information from principals or may use the information in ways inconsistent

with what the principal wants. Principal-agent theory gives rise to performance contracting studies and involves refining situational logic.¹⁶

Principal agent theory is highly applicable to the world of emergency management.¹⁷ Government emergency managers work in a universe of federal, state, local, and private sector agencies. An immense amount of government emergency management involves working with private contractors and volunteer organizations. Information flowing between agents and principals influences the decisions of principals in matters of fund distribution, budgeting, planning, program administration, and management in general. Emergency managers might be well-served by applying integrated noneconomic factors and structured economic analysis to help ensure that agents addressing disaster-related needs are better guided toward achieving the goals of the principals.

“Working the seams” is part of principal-agent theory. According to Richard Elmore,¹⁸ public managers must know how to work the edges of administrative-legislative interaction, intergovernmental relations, agencies, and interest groups. They need technical and analytical knowledge to do this. Their world is composed of agents, seams, and a technical core. Elmore’s contributions are immediately relevant to emergency managers.

Charles Lindblom’s¹⁹ theory of partisan mutual adjustment seeks to explain how public managers behave in governing relations. Lindblom’s theory gives emergency managers a guide to surviving in a world of partisan political competition among political actors and reinforces the findings outlined in Hecló’s book, *Government of Strangers*.²⁰ Hecló’s world is one in which political appointees interact with top civil servant administrators in a system of organic interdependence, something commonly found in emergency management in the United States.

Michael Barzelay’s *Breaking Bureaucracy* stresses customer satisfaction and advises public managers not to take their subordinate’s resistance to change personally.²¹ The Clinton “reinventing government” era gave low-level administrators more power, and these administrators needed education and training to help them maximize this opportunity. Under

James Lee Witt, the Clinton era FEMA assiduously embraced this movement. Customer satisfaction in government work has a ring of Jeffersonianism. Clearly, no profession can afford to ignore customer satisfaction very long without losing credibility. However, while customers may help professionals identify unmet needs, in no profession do customers actually define the nature of professional work.

KNOWLEDGE CODIFICATION AND DIFFUSION ISSUES

In any organization, experience and action are based on a blend of tacit, or uncodified, knowledge and structured, codified knowledge. Tacit knowledge is vague and depends on sharing expectations and values through social relationships. Codified knowledge is impersonal and learned through thinking and reasoning, not social relationships. To manage well, do emergency managers need to operate in face-to-face forums (consensual, democratic, Jeffersonian, and based on uncodified knowledge)? Or might they achieve their goals by imparting technocratic knowledge produced from data analysis, experimentation, Hamiltonian principles, and codified knowledge?

Lynn²² makes a worthwhile distinction about whether codified knowledge is diffused or undiffused knowledge. Diffused codified knowledge is written down and openly available so that audiences outside government can use it. If knowledge is codified but not diffused, it is contained within the bureaucracies. Someone could only master this knowledge if they worked inside the bureaucracy and learned the internal rules. If knowledge is diffused but not codified, those entering public management positions from the outside stand little chance of coordinating the work of others unless they receive help from those inside or have time to learn the uncodified information as government employees. To succeed, a public manager would have to “learn the agency,” typically from mentors.

Unfortunately, a considerable share of federal emergency management knowledge, if recorded at all, is partially codified but not sufficiently diffused beyond the agency. The Code of Federal Regulations for emergency management sets forth the core rules of federal emergency management, but it does not elucidate the essence of what emergencies and disasters are, and it does not

explain how to actually do emergency management work. Some federal emergency managers have codified their expertise, but much of this information resides within the bowels of various agency offices. A possible exception is the Department of Homeland Security (formerly FEMA) Emergency Preparedness and Response Directorate which disseminates codified emergency management knowledge and trains state and local authorities and managers. However, according to former FEMA official William Cumming, “the real disaster tradition was oral, not in writing, and ad hoc rather than procedural.”²³

Moreover, FEMA and its progenitor agencies lacked “history divisions” (common at the Department of the Army, Department of Energy, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, NASA, etc.) or institutional memories that were more than merely the recollections of employees who have worked there. A fiefdom or cult of personality results when management knowledge is both uncodified and inaccessible. (Such may have been the case in J. Edgar Hoover’s FBI many years ago.) Management control becomes highly personalized, unreviewable, and unappealable. Some fear that the advancement of emergency management largely depends on high-profile, charismatic figures chosen to lead agencies like FEMA or state and local emergency management agencies. If emergency management know-how depends heavily on a cult of personality, there is little hope emergency management will be professionalized.

In uncodified but diffused situations, clans are the norm, and people learn by being socialized. Those selected to join the US Diplomatic Corps face this type of situation. While diplomatic histories are many, those Americans who endeavor to become diplomats must learn how to operate through the State Department’s Diplomatic Corps before they are officially entrusted to do official US diplomatic work. Certain first responder emergency management occupational specialties (fire services and law enforcement) put great emphasis on socialization and mastery of uncodified knowledge and codified knowledge not widely diffused to those outside the occupational specialty. If emergency management is basically learned through apprenticeships within emergency management agencies, few academics will be drawn to the

field. In such a case, if the field of emergency management grows at all, it will grow as a function of inhouse training, not by broad-based advancement of emergency management education and research.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to the field of emergency management, the aim should be to develop new theory or adapt old theory to produce manageable policy. "An intellectual field cannot be built on self reports by the subjects of interest."²⁴ The field must advance through the production of codified knowledge widely diffused to anyone who chooses to learn it. Haddow and Bullock²⁵ have made a worthwhile start in their book *Introduction to Emergency Management* by conceiving emergency management as discipline, albeit with only an elemental start at theory construction and testing.

Emergency managers need to grasp the significance of political and managerial theories relevant to their work, and they need to understand their role in the policy process.²⁶ They need to appreciate that government embodies actors and structures intended to facilitate the effective operation of democracy and political accountability. Various political theories and concepts furnish "explanations of political behavior and the exercise of power."²⁷ Emergency managers need to be aware of the Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian cross-pressures they face.

To grow as professionals, emergency managers need to understand a range of political, organizational, managerial, and decisional theories and the conceptual reasoning embedded in each. Knowledge is power, and theories are tools that make it possible to expand, refine, and critique public management knowledge so necessary in performing emergency management work for the American people.

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Richard T. Sylves, PhD, Professor of Political Science and International Relations, University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware.

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