

Mordecai Lee

Bureaus of Efficiency: Reforming Local Government in the Progressive Era

Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2008. 292 pp. \$30.00. ISBN 978-0-87462-081-8

Reviewed by: Ulf Zimmermann

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA, USA

DOI: 10.1177/0275074010364062

The Progressive Era, roughly 1890 to 1920, Mordecai Lee writes, is often considered the third most constructive era in American history, after the Revolution and the New Deal. Most of the “constructive” changes of the era were outgrowths of the industrialization that had produced what then was incredible seeming progress.

Progressives were of more than a single stripe. For some, government was the problem—the corrupt political machines of the cities. For others, government was the solution—it could improve the city and the lives of its citizens, many of which had been blighted by the very industrialization that had made so many wealthy. Some Progressives promoted political progress—the direct election of senators and the enfranchisement of women, for example. Others, a more elite group of business leaders, saw progress more in streamlining government, reshaping cities in the image of the corporation as in the council-manager model. Insofar as they agreed on much, it was to separate administration from politics and to render both as efficient as possible.

This led to the creation of various good government groups, which established “municipal research bureaus” in many cities, modeled on the New York Bureau of Municipal Research. They would hire “disinterested” staff who would conduct surveys or audits on local government agencies and their activities and make “scientific” recommendations pertaining to their administration, finances, services, and what not. “Bureaus of Efficiency” were a subspecies of research bureaus. Whereas the broader municipal research bureaus were almost always nongovernmental, efficiency bureaus were to be found in both sectors.

With little literature on these efficiency bureaus, Lee’s is a first large-scale effort to examine them, within the broader context he adroitly outlines. Although there were numerous such bureaus across the country, Milwaukee and Chicago had both nonprofit and government efficiency bureaus, and a detailed examination and comparison of these form the core of the book. In the process, Lee seeks to assess what impact the four bureaus had on city government, what each meant by “efficiency,” and whether there were noteworthy differences between nonprofit and government bureaus.

The “efficiency” concept came out of engineering that produced the Industrial Revolution and is most familiar to us through Frederick Taylor’s efficiency gospel. Lee helpfully reminds us of Samuel Haber’s efficiency typology—mechanical, commercial, personal, and social—of which the first two are self-explanatory. But personal efficiency was the focus of some bureaus measuring the civil service indicated by hard work, will power, and thrift. Social efficiency referred to the government’s efforts to reduce disparities, inequalities, and immorality by helping citizens with employment, housing, hygiene, and education.

Such Progressive reforms were promoted in Milwaukee by the Socialist Party, with the slogan "the best government for the cheapest cost," which in 1910 actually got its candidate elected mayor. He and other Socialist Party leaders approached University of Wisconsin economist John R. Commons, by then well known for his work on the "labor question," to form the Milwaukee Bureau of Economy and Efficiency. It began with a broadly conceived "social" and economic survey of the city based on "the theory that one measure of the efficiency of a government is the extent to which it promotes the welfare of the citizens" (p. 45). This was not the business community's idea of efficiency, and the effort was paid for with citizen contributions.

By the time of the 1912 election, opponents portrayed the bureau as imposing a "Red" agenda on the city, and that was the end of the Socialist mayor and of the bureau. In response, City Club leaders started the Milwaukee Citizens' Bureau of Municipal Efficiency in 1913. For them, reform was a government that left their businesses alone and was less expensive and hence taxed less, and their nonprofit bureau was to help the city achieve such economies in a cooperative effort. They hired New York Bureau-trained Thomas Hinckley to run it.

Hinckley found government less than cooperative and thought the bureau would be more effective if it could publicize this lack of cooperation. He left frustrated but a new director eventually brought business leaders around to such publicizing, presenting their purpose as "educational." Their chief success lay in getting a couple of Bureau representatives appointed to the Mayor's Advisory Committee on Finance and his Civic Advisory Committee. They limited themselves strictly to financial/cost efficiencies, much as the previous government bureau had found it politic to shift from social policy to more purely "managerial" recommendations.

In Chicago, machine politics had reached a point that calls for reform came from a number of good government groups. The City Club had the activist University of Chicago political science professor Charles Merriam do an in-depth report on municipal revenues in 1905. By 1909 he got himself elected alderman and persuaded city council to create the Commission on City Expenditures. Also in 1909, the council created a Municipal Efficiency Commission with the narrow mandate to seek ways to strengthen the city's civil service system. This was the first official municipal body in the United States to use the term *efficiency* in its title. By the end of the year the combined efforts of these two commissions had concluded, respectively, that money was being wasted and that more civil servants were needed. This produced a consensus among council members that they needed a permanent entity in city government to address these issues. They formed the Civil Service Commission that carried out a number of projects through its Efficiency Division. But, by 1915, a Republican with his own machine became mayor and, recognizing its threat, got the commission abolished in 1916. It had, after all, led to the dismissal of several top police officials, the resignation of the Bureau of Food Inspection director, and the firing of a dozen corrupt building inspectors.

The work of the Merriam Commission spawned the nonprofit Chicago Bureau of Public Efficiency, with support from City Club leader Julius Rosenwald, president of Sears, who committed \$85,000 of his own money and served on it until 1926. The rest of its support came from 5-year commitments from other business leaders, but by 1930 this understandably began to dwindle. That led this elite group finally to accept the merger proposed by the larger middle-class reform organization, the Civic Federation, and this took place in 1932. With funding all but gone by then, substantive research and reports gave way increasingly to recommendations for public referenda; thus one measure of their success is that the public endorsed 112 of 138 referenda the Federation supported.

Although having both governmental and nongovernmental bureaus seems to have been unique to Milwaukee and Chicago, many a city had a nonprofit "municipal research bureau" or a government "bureau of efficiency." And, there were such bureaus in other governments—school districts, counties, and federal agencies, not to mention in an assortment of corporations. Over time,

governmental efficiency bureaus declined in comparison to nonprofit municipal research bureaus. This, Lee explains, was because citizens needed to see tangible results (like eliminating an efficiency bureau) for their tax dollars and such work was thus left to the voluntary sector.

As for the meaning of efficiency, that remained fuzzy or at least varied. Milwaukee was an outlier with the concept of social efficiency. Governments usually applied the term to the relative efficiency of their employees. Many understood it as an engineering term and as “value free.” But as Lee rightly points out, efficiency took on a distinct value (recall Taylor and Congress), and as public administration critics argued, if there were to be bureaus of efficiency in government then there should also be bureaus for effectiveness and responsiveness covering other goals of government.

Whether government or nonprofit, these bureaus, Lee aptly sums up, “were essentially efforts to promote modern and rigorous rationality in all aspects of government, including decision-making, analysis, financial systems, and personnel management” (p. 201). The bureaus brought modernity to government, whether from inside or outside. In his four examples, their sectoral location did not make any difference—they all had similar comparable impacts. The only notable difference he found was that nonprofits were deemed more pleasant places to work. The “cult of efficiency” is still around, embedded as a permanent norm in our political culture, he rightly concludes.