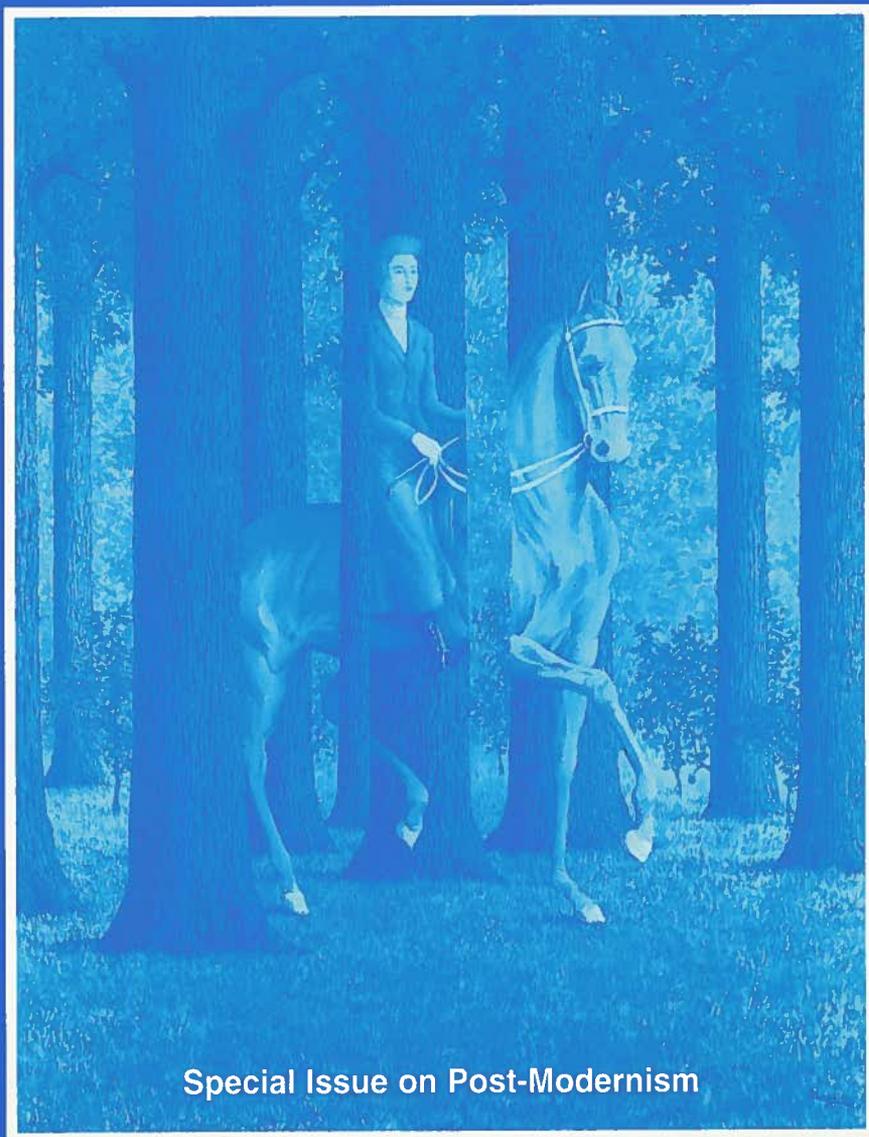


# *Public Voices*

Volume III

Number 1



Special Issue on Post-Modernism

# *Public Voices*

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## SPECIAL ISSUE ON POST-MODERNISM

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P. A. discourse—conceptualized as a language game governed by rules—could be more productive if we were more conscious of the constraints imposed by our game's rules and if we were more open to the possibility of playing with our socially constructed rules. The

paper presents an example of a more productive game, situated in the conceptual space between the postmodern and the modern. The play of irony, characteristic of postmodernity, is explicated in terms of Umberto Eco's, Jean-Francois Lyotard's and Richard Rorty's accounts. A practical P.A. implication lies in the writing and rewriting about institutional practices from decentered perspectives. The paper illustrates how, even in modernity, P.A. discourse has avoided opportunities for useful play that other disciplines have followed. The idea of P.A. discourse as a language game is discussed, and examples of rules used in P.A. theorizing and practice are offered. The paper suggests that modernist P.A. discourse has been modeled too much on the riddling genre understood as a paradigm of discovery. P.A. discourse, it is claimed, should embrace play.

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this shift toward the unconscious is illustrated by discussing transference manifestations and defensive functioning. It is also proposed that organizations can benefit from storying and re-storying, where psychoanalytic interpretations are understood in terms of truth approximations. Two examples are given that understand organizational behavior in terms of the Oedipal scene. How the modernist and the postmodern frameworks provide different understandings of the workings of the unconscious claims of distinct disciplines, positivism, categorization, and ultimate reality.

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Government buildings can provide physical reference points for the creation of common meaning, even in the postmodern condition. They remind us of our collective activities, help to distinguish the public and private spheres, and crystalize important institutional meanings. Also the relatively open nature of government buildings in this country, and their use as backdrops for public demonstrations, underscore our democratic freedoms. Another

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# Postmodern Challenge to Public Administration

*David John Farmer, Guest Editor*

## INTRODUCTION: LISTENING TO OTHER VOICES

The postmodern is a common point of departure for the articles in this issue as the writers explore topics relevant to public administration and policy-making. Postmodernism is one of the philosophical meta-frameworks that offers profound insights—as well as difficulties—not only for social and political understanding but also for thinking and practice in interpreting and addressing the macro and longer-term problematics of bureaucracy.

So, first, what is postmodernism? Second, can it be of practical significance in coping with the more fundamental problems of bureaucracy? Third, what is in this issue of the journal?

### What is Postmodernism?

Postmodern public administration, a work which has barely begun, amounts to the working through (and re-working through) in the P.A. context of a radical liberation ethic. It entails listening to other voices, marginalized voices like those of women, minorities, bearers of policed sexualities, the economically and politically colonized, and others. The listening is different, e.g., different from the listening (worthwhile as that may have been) of modernist liberalism. This liberation ethic, which can be contrasted with the efficiency (effectiveness, responsiveness) and related ethics which have dominated the history of American Public Administration, results from postmodernism's skepticism.

At its philosophical core, postmodernism is skepticism. Skepticism should not be understood in its everyday pejorative meaning (signifying pessimism and cynicism) but in its "neutral" philosophical

sense. Skepticism is a family of epistemological positions, running throughout philosophy's history, that share the perspective that the human capacity to know what is ultimately and totally real is significantly limited. The skeptical perspective can be contrasted with the views of those like Plato and Descartes who hold that human reason can permit understanding of reality, as it really is. Being a skeptic does not entail denying that one can know the truth as long as truth is understood as truth within a language or a way of life. It does entail denying that unaided human reason can know transcendental truth.

At its ethico-political core, postmodernism emphasizes the ecstatic emancipatory effect that is consistent with working through the normative and other results of its philosophical skepticism. Modernity is described by Jurgen Habermas in terms of the Enlightenment's rationalizing intentions; ever increasing rationality means ever more human happiness and ever greater morality. Postmodernists reject this rationalizing (Habermas 1983). Having a different view of reason, postmodernism adopts an ethico-political posture that seeks liberation of suppressed voices. It privileges radical multi-culturalism. For it, the world really is different when looked at from the perspective of those who are different.

On one view (and one view only), postmodernity is a matter of eras. The Western world moved (after Rome collapsed) from the ancient to the medieval era, and the medieval around 1500 A.D. (give or take) moved to the modern; other cultural/geographical areas have different era chronologies. The suggestion is that the world as a whole is now moving (has moved, will move) into a postmodern era. Here, the postmodern condition will dominate, and a leading feature of this condition will be a working through of postmodernism's skepticism. Views on the radical effects naturally differ. For example, consider the new role for images. Baudrillard writes about an implosion of 'reality and appearance' and of the emergence of hyperreality (Baudrillard 1988). This is no surprise in our advertising-dominated commerce, where a thing (like a rock or a car) has to become a sign (a pet rock or a jaguar) in order to enter the market. As another example, grand narratives (like Marxism) that purport to explain the development of human history are seen as

deconstructible. The scene in the postmodern condition shifts from macro to micro-politics. And there is much more.

The postmodern perspective has become encrusted (already) with misunderstandings. One is the canard that postmodernism entails that nothing in the world is real (anti-realism). A postmodernist could (and surely some do) hold this position. But there is no entailment, and thinkers like Derrida certainly do not. A contrast is sometimes drawn between Derridean and "American Style" deconstruction, and Derrida himself has unequivocally affirmed that his guiding concept of the text or of context does not exclude the world, reality or history (Fish 1993). Realism and antirealism are not all-or-nothing positions. If we say that meanings are not real entities (in the sense that they do not exist independently of human construction), we are not obligated to suppose that nothing is real. There is a range of realist positions. At the minimal, there is the limited realist position that something exists independently of the mental, even if we know no more about it than this.

A second canard is that postmodernism's attention to language (treating the meanings of events, institutions and lives as texts, for example) entails that postmodernists think that all reduces to mere words. It is true that there has been a significant linguistic turn in the twentieth century, no less in much of analytical philosophy. Many - not just postmodernists - have come to recognize that our language shapes and distorts our understanding of the world, and that thinking requires and is shaped by language. But none of this entails any nihilistic view that anything goes. Nor does it entail language idealism.

Sometimes the misunderstandings are more simple-minded. One such is—postmodernism must be wrong because, by definition, nothing can be after the modern. Yawn!

### **Practical Significance?**

Working out the practical significance of postmodernism for coping with the macro and longer-term problems of bureaucracy is an ongoing task for public administration and public policy thinking. This applies no less to any other meta-framework, like critical theory.

However, already it is clear enough that there are practical implications—like the prospect of anti-administration.

See my acrostic-type puzzle later in this issue. When completed, it provides a summary of one view of the differences between the modernist and the postmodern perspectives and of some differences between modernist administration and postmodern anti-administration. The image of anti-administration is borrowed from physics—anti-matter. Anti-administration is administration which is directed at negating administrative-bureaucratic power. Anti-administration is a form of managing that negates the hierarchical-rational Weberian outlook and that privileges anarchism. Rejecting the hierarchical bent of the modernist view even to the extent of rejecting cultural hierarchy, it is radically multi-cultural. It seeks the liberation of marginalized voices. Administering anti-administratively is radically skeptical about its own competence, reflecting postmodernism's skepticism.

Here is a thumb-nail sketch of four of the elements of anti-administration (in the completed puzzle)—imaginization, deconstruction, deterritorialization, and alterity (Farmer 1995). I have described them in more detail elsewhere. Imaginization reflects that the role of imagination in postmodernity will parallel that described for rationalization in modernity. As Habermas (1983) describes it, a leading feature of modernity is the development of substantive reason in three autonomous spheres—objective science, morality and law, and art. In postmodernity, the autonomies collapse. The dominance of imagination is no longer confined merely to the aesthetic. In modernity, imagination plays a secondary role in the context of justification (if not of discovery); in postmodernity, rationalization will still play a role, but there will be a shift to the poetic. Postmodern anti-administration will see managers striving to manage, with (for one thing) imagination taking the leading role. Managers would extend responsibility for imagining to subordinates. Individuals would give imagination the central role in their interrelationships and in their lives.

Deconstruction is “good reading” not only of documents but also of situations, events and lives— all being grouped under the heading of “texts.” This good reading (or interpretation) is an understanding

that recognizes the limitations of all texts and languages and that appreciates the value of dismantling the narratives that typically underlie texts. Texts and languages are inevitably replete with binary categorial oppositions and metaphors that, while useful to a point, condition and distort. Public administration theory and practice is no less immune. Further, postmodern P.A. should adjust to the new world of images. Bureaucracy is part of the swirl of images, and public policy is subjected to a politics run like show business. Seduction, lying (newspeak, C.Y.A., breaking the rules to get things done) and signs without referents constitute the postmodern administrative world. Appearances have to be taken seriously; deconstruct them.

Deterritorialization denotes the change in postmodernity in the character and organization of knowledge. In anti-administration, the grids of assumptions that are imposed on our understanding are removed. The expected change in the character of knowing is made more understandable by developments in Philosophy of Science, as in the work of Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend, and Imre Lakatos (see, e.g., Diesing 1991). This change will be in the abandonment of the privileged epistemological status for "scientific" propositions; science will be understood, as it always should have been, as a discourse among a variety of discourses. This is illustrated in some postpositivist work undertaken in terms of Organization Theory and of Constructivist Inquiry. The primary focus of Public Administration can be expected to shift from discovery to construction. The expected change in the organization of knowledge will be the break-down in the barriers between disciplines. But the breakdown will not represent a return to a unified "tree of knowledge" approach. The postmodern arrangement has been described as being as ill-structured as a rhizome—similar in ways to the Internet web. Public Administration as a "social sciencey" enterprise can be expected to become even less defined and even more open to sources like literature and art.

Alterity, the stance toward the moral other, is intended to reflect the ethical impulse of postmodernism. Postmodernism is not nihilistic. On the contrary, postmodernity has an ethical stance, and this stance has relevance for bureaucracy. I have described this relevance in

terms of four elements of anti-administration. These are an openness to the "other," a preference for diversity, an opposition to meta-narratives, and an opposition to the established order. My favorite example of this antiadministrative ethic is provided by Thomas Szasz in his 1961 book *The Myth of Mental Illness*. Szasz, a practitioner and professor of psychiatry, argued that "mental illness is a myth." Anti-administration involves developing a similar "anti" attitude at the institutional level. It would direct itself against the institution's own program, parallel to Szasz. It would be directed against itself as an institution and against all similar institutions, thus achieving an antiinstitutional institution.

### **This issue?**

What can the reader find in this issue? The point of departure, in various senses, for the articles in this issue is indeed postmodernism. This is not to say that these articles "are" postmodern or that any of the writers (including the guest editor) "is" a postmodernist. It would be closer to the mark to pigeon-hole (if pigeon-hole we must) most of the writers as pomo-sympathizers in widely varying degrees, and to see one as rejecting postmodernism. These degrees of variation in sympathizing surely range from narrow/limited to broad/strong. Not to "be" a postmodern entails neither opposing postmodernism nor being positionless.

Drs. Orion White and Cynthia McSwain, writing under their nom de plume of O.C. McSwite, address directly the issue of administering anti-administratively, and their tales from the "real world" relate particularly to the "rationality" of the organizational condition and to postmodern alterity. They invite us to see the postmodern (and more) by looking at our own administrative situations with open and honest eyes.

My own contribution is about P.A. Discourse as Play with a Purpose. There is no doubt that P.A. discourse is a language game. One serious question is how can it become a more creative, more imaginative, more spontaneous, more open-to-marginalized-voices (yes, more playful and more fruitful) game. The suggestion is that there is a more practical game in the conceptual space between the postmodern and the modern.

Dr. Janet Hutchinson writes about the vantage point of postmodern feminism. One of postmodernism's contributions is to open up the prospect of changing P.A.'s way of speaking, the way of doing business. Several strands of social and political philosophy and several ideologies, like the rich varieties of anarchism and ecologism, contribute to an understanding of a better way of speaking. Arguably, nothing contributes more effectively than postmodern feminism.

Dr. Rosemary Farmer offers a clinical perspective on administration. In P.A., a few have written well about the unconscious. Most of us have only toyed with this powerful voice, however. We need to listen more closely to our own and our organization's unconscious—warts and all. This article speaks of the unconscious as a space between the modern and the postmodern.

Dr. Cam Stivers offers a reflection on postmodernism's utility for public administration, taking off from Robert Frost's "Mending Wall." "Something there is that doesn't love a wall..." This article too bears on the issue of postmodern justice—openness to the other, alterity.

Dr. Charles Goodsell writes of what he sees as our need for social anchors in a postmodern world. He speaks in view of what some call the postmodern condition, the radical shifting that is occurring (will occur, has occurred) in our context.

Drs. Hugh Miller and Chuck Fox offer a chart. Kindly, they consented to it being represented in this issue as if it were graffiti on a wall. It will raise the issue for some of the relationship between second-order perspectives, like postmodernism and critical theory, and P.A. discourse.

The review essay is written, I am happy to say, by Dr. Lisa Zanetti. Because some of my own writings are noted in the review, it was appropriate (avoiding conflict of interest) that I played no part in arranging for this essay contribution.

Thanks to Pamela A. Gibson, a doctoral candidate, for doing the art and computer work in presenting the puzzle and the wall.

The cover painting, reproducing Rene Magritte's "The Blank Signature," makes many points. One point is a general surrealist claim that

reality extends beyond conscious rationality. Another is that the importance of critical frameworks—like postmodernism or even surrealism—extends beyond the popularity or unpopularity of the name. Names may come and go. However, we should listen deeper—to what such movements can say to us.

Thanks to *Public Voices*, especially editor-in-chief Dr. Marc Holzer and managing editor Vatche Gabrielian, for opening this issue to the postmodern impulse. Thanks most particularly to the readers of this issue of "Public Voices" for being willing to read more about what many of us recognize as "the" moral concern in contemporary public policy and administration—"listening to other voices."

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## Call for Manuscripts

*Public Voices* hopes to provide a more emotive approach to public management than the traditional forms of analysis presented by many professional journals. As such, *Public Voices* focuses on humanistic, artistic and reflective expression concerning public administrators and the people they serve. Unlike traditional social science journals, *Public Voices* publishes unorthodox, controversial perspectives on bureaucracy by students of organization, broadly defined as public servants, the public, writers, and artists, as well as academics from all fields. That dialogue is aimed to:

—explore conflicts between efficiency and ethics in organizational life, including ethical dilemmas faced by bureaucrats;

—examine the consequences of a bureaucratic environment for employees and clients, including ways in which clients are assisted by individual public servants or abused by large systems; and generate new ideas for improving organizations.

Manuscripts and proposals for featured topics (i.e. symposia) are welcome on a wide variety of artistic and humanistic perspectives relevant to the public sector. Original fiction, including creative writing, poetry, and plays, will be featured in each issue. Reviews of novels, cinema, art and other related forms of expression may comment upon life within bureaucracies. Artistic works may include such material as photographs, sketches, and cartoons, and such work may be featured on the cover of each issue. Personal essays by public servants and clients are also welcome. All submissions will be evaluated on a blind, peer reviewed basis.

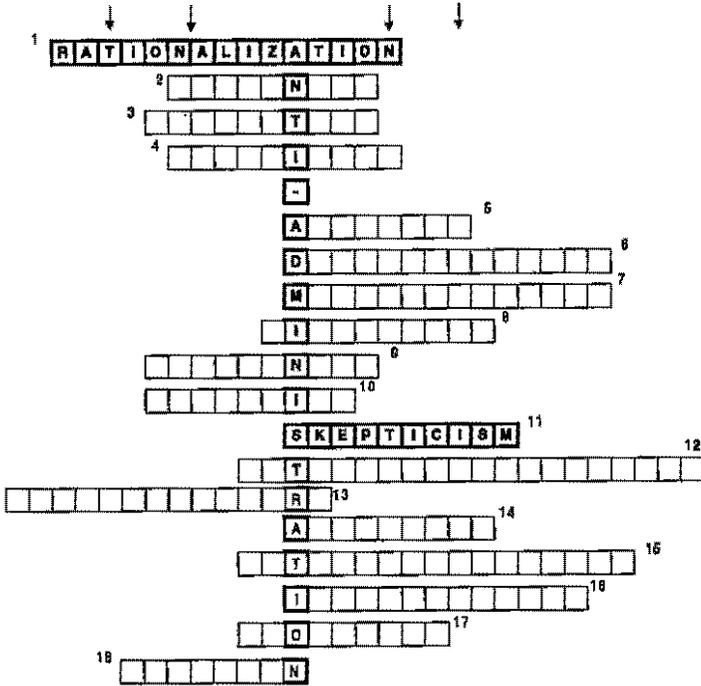
Manuscripts should be submitted with two cover pages: the first with the author's name and full contact information, the second with only the title. Five copies of each manuscript should be sent to:

Prof. Marc Holzer, Editor-in-Chief, *Public Voices*  
Graduate Department of Public Administration, 701 Hill Hall,  
360 King Blvd., Rutgers University, Newark, N.J. 07102

META-PERSPECTIVES AND SOME POSSIBLE P.A. IMPLICATIONS

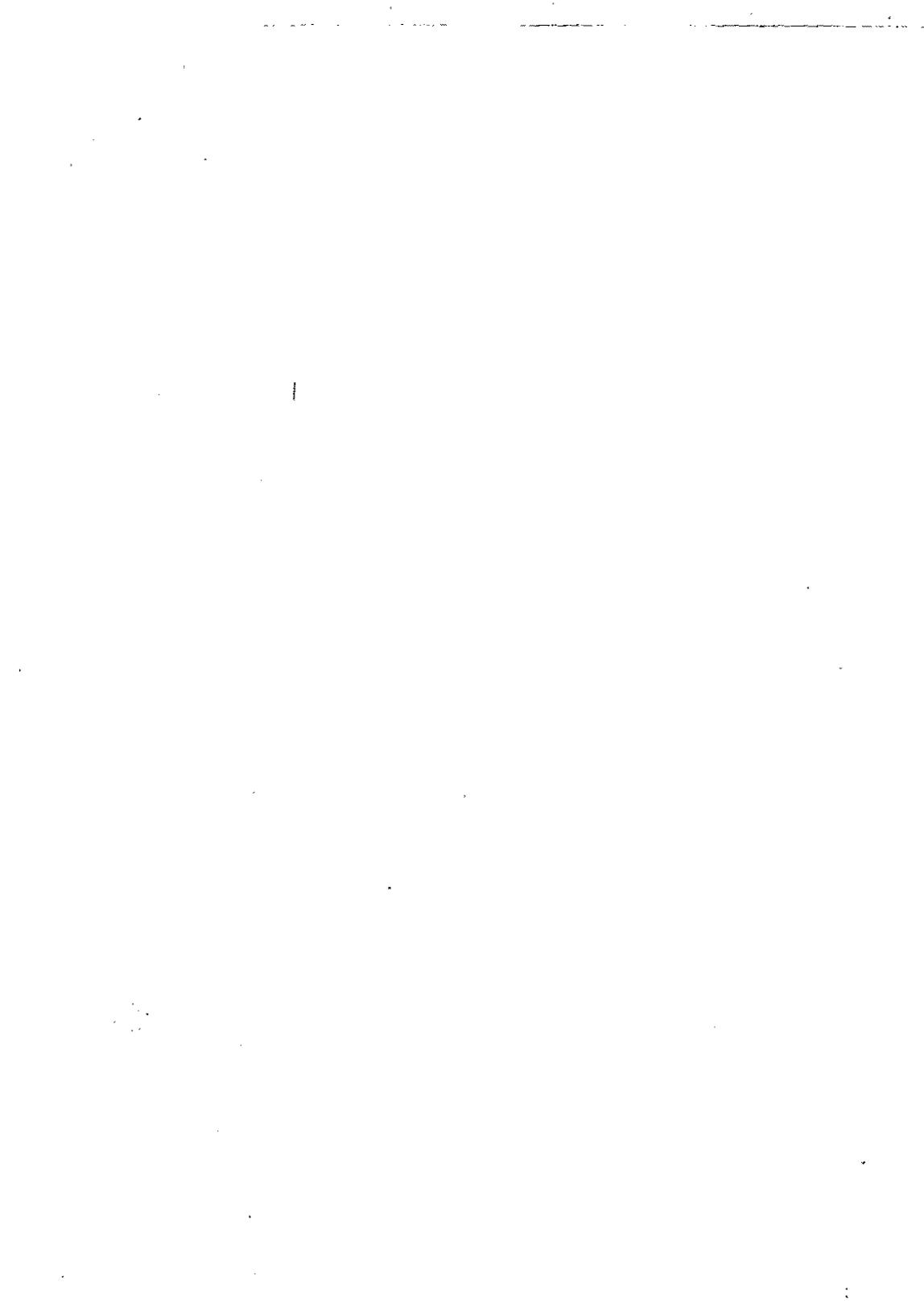
**MODERNIST PERSPECTIVE**  
 Attitude: More and more rationalization yields  
 greater human happiness and moral behavior

**POSTMODERN PERSPECTIVE**  
 Attitude: Implications of philosophical  
 skepticism yielding aesthetic liberation etc.



**Clues:**

1. The dynamic of modernity, according to Habermas.
2. Does this century or P.A. provide supporting evidence for the rationalizing equation?
3. According to Baudrillard, what seduction is to postmodernity, \_ is to modernity. Also to modernist P.A.
4. Capitalism's prime value, or P.A.'s modernist red herring.
5. Isn't hesitancy postmodernity's moral stance toward this?
6. Strong antiseptic if, as postmodern skeptics imply, P.A. discourse is distorted with metaphors and binary oppositions.
7. Often mistaken for mono-culturalism, with a dash of indulgence.
8. A goal of many isms, like postmodernism. Not P.A.?
9. Modernity's mascot god, rational and ordered. Wasn't Mozart much more than this?
10. What mod P.A. and Plato value in a good bureaucracy.
11. Humans aren't gods, nor are P.A. thinkers - or pomo's epistemological attitude.
12. Like a rhizome; bye-bye disciplinary boundaries and privileged discourse.
13. The milieu of modernity; just tell us what to do?
14. Large literature - is this ideology marginalized in P.A. thinking?
15. No more father figures, no more princes - does P.A. need this nostalgia in its closet?
16. Rationalization's heir?
17. Postmodernism's mascot god, celebrating letting it all hang out.
18. Back to modernity, patriarchy and the iron cage. A prescription for what? Or just a description?



# **Stories from the “Real World”: Administering Anti-Administratively**

*O. C. McSwite*

“The most reckless and treacherous of all theorists is he who professes to let facts and figures speak for themselves.”

Alfred Marshall

Here are some true tales of life in public organizations.

## **Story One: “Fahrenheit 451”**

In a large agency that conducted the bulk of its regulatory business by mail, the manager of the Mail Processing Division won an award as outstanding manager of the year. The award was largely due to the Mail Division’s consistent ability (indeed, without fail) to clear each day’s load of mail by the end of the business day. The mail flowed through the agency smoothly, and workers in the Mail Division were happy. Indeed it was the high morale that the manager seemed to be able to maintain that was credited with creating the extra effort on the workers’ parts that enabled them to process all the mail before the agency closed each day.

Shortly after the award, an academic researcher began carrying out a study of another aspect of the organization. The young man was given a desk in a small cubicle and often came in early in the morning to review documents in preparation for his interviews. He began to notice a strange pattern. The chief of the Mail Division also came in early, and the researcher began to notice him carrying bags of mail out of the mail processing room each morning before his staff arrived. Intrigued by this behavior, the researcher began, somewhat surreptitiously, to investigate further. What he discovered was the secret to the Mail Division’s seemingly perfect efficiency in

clearing the mail on a daily basis. Knowing just how much mail his staff could process in a day, the Mail Division manager arrived early each morning, counted a set of mail equal to this amount, and then took the remainder down to the basement incinerator and burned it.

When this subsequently became known to the agency leadership, the manager confessed and was fired. The investigation, carried out quietly, documented that the manager had been randomly burning the "excess" mail for several years. The work flow and life of the agency had simply become normalized around this practice without ever knowing that it was taking place. Given that much of the agency's work was done via mail, there had been, of course, numerous instances of presumably "lost" mail, but these, too were normalized as unavoidable.

## **Story Two: "Mission Impossible"**

In a large university, a young assistant professor of political science and public administration had coffee one afternoon with an older colleague from another department. The colleague was an outstanding scholar at the national level, but institutional politics had pushed him into a marginal position in his own university. In the eyes of the university administration, he was definitely an outcast. In the course of the coffee chat, the colleague suggested that the public administrationist propose to his departmental chair that a special task force be set up to study the relationship of the state administration to the university, with the idea of better defining and enhancing its effectiveness.

Upon returning to his department, the young professor went to his Department Chair and made the proposal—though without mentioning its source. The Chair thought this an excellent idea. The two drafted a letter, complete with suggested names for the committee membership and with the Dean of the Law School as the head of the task force. They sent the letter, which strongly advocated the task force idea, to the President of the University. Two days later the Chair called the associate professor into his office to announce, with some excitement, that the President had simply had their letter

retyped over his name and sent out to the list of people nominated. The University-State Administration Task Force was underway.

When the task force began to meet, it became clear that neither the head nor the members had much of an idea of its mandate. Concerns were expressed that the university should not become a consulting service for the state administration, but these were quickly balanced by comments that improved cooperation was always possible, was in the university's interest, and after all, the President had given this project a high priority. The origin of the task force, in the letter from the department chair and the assistant professor to the President, was never revealed or discussed in any way. Partly as a way of gaining perspective on its purpose, the task force began to invite high level members of state administrative agencies to attend its meetings.

Word of this activity quickly reached the Office of the Governor, and he immediately made a bid to have his closest top assistant meet with the group on a regular basis, in effect becoming a member. This staff person showed great enthusiasm for the project, and he made it clear that the Governor thought that the work of the task force was one of the most significant moves that the university had made in recent history. The Governor wanted something major to come out of the group and was going to push to make certain that it did.

This quantum jump in momentum caused the anxiety level of the task force members to escalate dramatically. They felt pressured to recommend significant changes in university-state relations, but they saw this as a potentially serious compromise of the university's traditional mission, and hence as controversial within the university faculty community. Exacerbating these feelings was the sense that the President had provided no boundaries to the mandate of the group. These concerns were expressed spontaneously at a meeting that the Governor's assistant was unable to attend. The conclusion was that going to the President for guidance at this juncture would be a sign of some ineptitude on the part of the task force. Further, it would be seen as an inappropriate invitation to the administration to set policy for faculty professional work.

Then a lucky break occurred. The head of the task force happened to encounter the President of the University in a Washington D.C. airport and arranged to sit next to him on the flight home. This afforded an opportunity for the head informally to chat with the President about the work of the task force and invite him to meet with the members for an informal conversation reviewing and planning the course of their further work. When, shortly after this, the president appeared for the meeting, the group showed relief and began to question him with some enthusiasm about its mission, posing what they saw to be the key issues involved in their work.

The atmosphere quickly turned quite tense, as it became clear that the President was feeling "put on the spot" without adequate preparation—to which he responded somewhat defensively by suggesting that the committee ought to know how to proceed with its work, that it was not his place to tell a faculty group the specifics of how to make policy about their own professional lives. His other response was to repeatedly "throw the ball" to the department chair—who with the young professor had originally sent the letter to the President proposing the task force—a gesture to which the chair repeatedly demurred. The whole proceeding became quite awkward and culminated when the department chair asked the President a rather pointed question about the purpose of the group. The President could not hide a look of some shock and dismay and responded with a weak answer.

The young professor watched all this with more than a little amazement, especially when his chair asked the President the question about the purpose of the task force, given that its source had been the chair himself, at least indirectly. After the meeting, the professor asked the chair "what he was up to," specifically, in asking the President this question. The chair responded simply, "I just wanted to know the answer!"

Curiously (or not), even though nothing of any specific substance had been transacted at the meeting with the President, the group subsequently defined the meeting as having been critically important to the question of how to carry its work forward and congratulated its head for arranging the President's appearance. The question of mandate was never again raised. The result of the task force's work,

which went on for months, was quite disappointing to the Governor's assistant, as he later reported that he felt the group's report was simply "contentless, unactionable, rah rah."

### **Story Three: "Disclosure II"**

During a Christmas party being held in the offices of a large agency, two high level executives went into a secluded area of the building and began to have sexual intercourse. The two executives, a man and a woman, worked together in the capacities of Chief (the man) and Deputy Chief (the woman). Unbeknownst to them, the place where they chose to have sex was within the range of one of the building's security television surveillance cameras. As a result, the officer monitoring the camera saw the couple and called for two other officers as "backup" to go up and confront the couple—but not before a small crowd had gathered around the television monitor. The officers decided upon a plan of action that involved a pair confronting the couple at what was later described as "the crucial moment" (the officers were informed of this moment over their portable radio by the officer at the television monitor). When the two officers burst in on the couple, they both immediately displayed their agency identity cards and declared that they had a legitimate right to be in the building at that hour. (This fact is recorded here only because much was made of it in subsequent discussions of the matter.)

The incident quickly became widely known through the grapevine of the agency, and, while no formal action was taken against either of the two, it generated widespread and intense discussion among agency employees at all levels. Much was amused gossip, but a serious aspect also developed. This was energized by a sense of outrage on the part of many women professionals in the agency who felt that the woman executive involved had "sold out" all women employees by participating in such an act with her boss. A good deal was made of the kind of sexual activity involved—the woman was performing oral sex on the man—as indicative of the exploitative nature of the encounter they were having. Since the woman executive was highly visible in the agency and considered as something of a role model for other women, such discussion did not abate with time but grew in

intensity. Finally, a number of women managers decided to organize a meeting about the matter—involving the woman executive and other women staff members—so that the perceived issues involved could be confronted and discussed. When this meeting took place, the talk about the incident and the issues it raised was direct, frank, even blunt. The woman executive who was the focus of the discussion listened to various points of view and expression of feelings ranging from dismay to outrage. Her response was delivered evenly and strongly and gave no ground to her critics whatsoever. She declared simply that she possessed a very strong sex drive, frequently found herself becoming sexually excited in settings like the party, and felt it completely appropriate and within her rights to satisfy this powerful drive with any willing partner and in any way she chose. Not to allow this, she argued, would be to fall prey to male stereotypes and expectations about women. Her interlocutors were shocked, and said so, but she did not relent in her opinion. As she saw it, the incident had nothing to do with other women and the image or career chances of women within the agency.

News of the meeting and this discussion spread quickly and attention now shifted to it. The issues involved became a topic of coffee break and luncheon conversation in the way that policy and political issues are discussed. Some even felt free to broach the topic with the woman executive. It was not long before the incident lost the aura it had of being an exotic, extraordinary, or dark event; it became, in a sense, ordinary, and, after a while, faded into the background and was dropped.

### **Story Four: “Beavis, et al, at Work”**

A large public agency had recently decided to seek increased efficiency by carrying out a major downsizing operation. The agency's top executives reorganized and offered a rather lucrative “buy out” plan to employees as part of the reorganization. A large number of professional staff, specifically the more highly skilled and capable ones who could easily find employment elsewhere, took the buy out option and left the agency.

The flow of work in the agency immediately began to slow after the exodus of the competent staff who took the buy out. This fact raised serious questions of public safety, as the agency's mission involved the control of highly dangerous materials. To improve the situation, top management decided to bring in a large number of contractors to do the work that had been done by the downsized employees. Many of these contractors were young "X" generation people who were not as skilled and were far less experienced than the people they replaced. In response to the problem of low expertise and experience, management then sought to re-hire some of the downsized employees as consultants, a position from which, it was hoped, they could teach the young contractor professionals how to do the work the agency required.

The former employees, coming back as consultants under this plan, found their former workplace had been transformed. The physical work space had been, as one worker put it, "trashed," there was very little supervision or discipline, not much work was being done, and what was being done was sloppy and replete with errors such that there was more rework going on than original work. One rehired consultant whose computer malfunctioned was repeatedly frustrated in his attempt to get one of the young "Xer" contractors, whose job was in-house computer maintenance, to fix it. He complained of this for weeks to the supervisor involved, who in turn complained that there "didn't seem to be any way to get those people to do anything." The worker with the broken computer made the point that his time was being wasted by going to the supervisor and asking to use his computer for making out his time report each week, a request to which the supervisor acquiesced with noticeable discomfort.

Most striking of all to the rehired consultant workers was the organizational culture that had taken over with the advent of the contractors. The contractors spent a great deal of time playing computer games, surfing the net, and chatting with each other on line. Because they defined the rehired consultants as just like themselves, they took them into their confidence about their attitudes toward the organization. They told the consultants that the agency was a place where the management motto was "We give no loyalty at all to employees and

expect none in return!”—a quip that was delivered with a laugh, like a joke. They further said that they, the contractors, had developed their own organizational culture, with specific loyalties and rules. The central norm of the contractor culture was what they referred to as the “30–20–40” rule. This rule, elaborated, meant: “Show up for thirty (hours), work twenty (hours), and bill for forty (hours).”

What was even more amazing to the consultants was the attitude and behavior of the supervisory staff. Before the downsizing, relations between the supervisory and professional staffs had been cooperative and were generally rated as good to excellent. Most supervisors were able to set goals and provide adequate feedback, motivate, and use their authority judiciously and effectively to maintain a well-functioning work environment. The experience of the downsizing program, though, had the effect of making them apprehensive about keeping their jobs. The supervisors knew that top management was heavily invested in defining the downsizing program as a major and successful move toward improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the agency, and they were fearful that saying or doing anything to contradict this definition of the matter could put them on the outs with management and possibly cost them career advancement or even their jobs.

Hence, when the consultants raised questions about the behavior of the contractors, the supervisors demurred, saying that they felt that as soon as they “better learned what was required in their work” things would straighten out. After all, they said, the reorganization-downsizing program was a brilliant stroke on the part of agency leadership, something that had been needed for a long time and that the whole world was going through, so how could it fail?

## **General Commentary on the Stories**

*Comment 1.* The first thing that stands out about these stories is how familiar they are to anyone with experience in formal organizations. The details of the stories differ only in degree and nuance from what might be called a canon of public administrative folklore. The main difficulty I found was in choosing which stories to tell from the large number I had at hand. This is not to say that the field

of public administration has developed a canon of folklore such as the stories told here. The canon to which I refer is maintained in administrator's minds and is passed on almost exclusively through informal conversation inside and outside the work setting. I regularly use the teaching device of having students develop and present in class case study material from their own experience. The cases I have heard presented range from the mundane to the bizarre, with the ones told here ranking about in the middle on the scale of representativeness. The point of this comment is simply that stories like the ones told above are familiar to anyone who has worked for long in formal organizations.

*Comment 2.* The second comment I want to make about these stories seems to contradict the first. I would assert that the stories above are in another sense highly unfamiliar to the staffs of formal organizations. The official image of formal organizations, the idea of how they are structured, of how people within them behave, and of how their work processes proceed, is rather completely alien to the picture suggested by the stories recounted above.

What students of administration are taught is that organizations are arenas of rational action. Being rational, of course, means that plans are made, goals are set, means are defined and evaluated against rational efficiency criteria, optimal implementation strategies are chosen, a system of rationally structured incentives for inducing the behavior required from organization members is set in place, and people in the organization rationally respond to this system of incentives. If this were really true, none of the incidents described above would have ever taken place. They are all based on "irrational" behavior—if the word rational means anything at all.

Students of public administration acquire this official image of how organizations work by virtue of spending a great deal of time and effort learning how to conduct the routines that make up rational processes. In addition, of course, they are exposed to a variety of perspectives on organizations that go beyond the rational model, but these are typically presented as a kind of helpful, but marginal, critique of their other, more rigorous lessons having to do with rationalism. They clearly get the message that while a little critique

sharpens analytical thinking, it is not to be confused with the nasality of organizational life, i.e., rational decision and action.

One major reason for this, perhaps, is that the "empirical research process," especially the quantitative empirical research process, seems not to function in a fashion that allows the kind of quite actual reality that folklore stories contain to be represented. Karl Weick has commented in a related vein that the process of organizational sense making, which is the primary focus of his own work, is for all practical purposes not to be found in the empirical research literature of organizations (Weick, 1995).

*Comment 3.* Related to these prior two points is this observation: the organizational reality that these stories reveal is confirmed by facts, easily at hand on virtually a daily basis, from experience. If we take, for example, that communication in organizations is much more approximate than it is depicted in the rational model, we can see the point. It is a commonplace of organizational life that messages of even the simplest content are not understood or understood uniformly. In my own university a while back, an issue arose over the fact that many classes were being held during Board of Visitor's Day, in violation of an instruction from the university President that all classes on that day be canceled. The President of the university issued a definite and sternly worded memorandum reiterating the rule that classes be canceled, and stated in no uncertain terms that conformance with the instruction by the faculty would be monitored by the administration at the next Visitor's Day.

After the next Visitor's Day, when it was apparent that classes had been held at the same level as before the president's memo, the student newspaper ran a front page story consisting of interviews with faculty who had held class. The interviews explained how each faculty member felt that the President's memo "was not meant for" his or her specific situation, and that holding class as usual was consistent with the instruction.

This result, of course, is not really a surprise to anyone who works in formal organizations. When I ask groups of working managers to tell me what they would guess is the "coefficient of efficiency" that research has shown to be characteristic of communication in

organizations, their responses are surprisingly close to correct (10 to 12 per cent). This is what experience has taught: the accuracy in reception of messages from sender to receiver in the workplace is virtually nil, probably because many messages are sent with little clear intended meaning, as in the story of university committee above, and the frames through which messages are filtered are as varied as the individuals who receive them. While the official model of rational organizations tell us that they operate on the basis of data and information, clear understanding, and careful calculation, experience powerfully teaches the lesson that this is not so.

### **Specific Commentary on the Stories**

Given what those experienced in organizations know about how they actually operate, the question can legitimately be raised as to how they continue to hold together and function at all. We can find various answers to this question in these stories. The first, about the burning of agency mail, reveals that human beings must possess a capacity for making sense out of work processes even when the official information available for implementing the processes is insufficient and unreliable. The agency staff in this story had continued to conduct the regulatory business of the agency despite the fact that, on a daily basis, a significant portion of their mail had been, unknown to them, randomly selected for burning. The gaps and disruptions in communications must have been considerable, yet the agency was able to achieve a normalized mode of carrying out its business.

It is unfortunate that no one studied the agency subsequent to the revelation that the mail was being burned. Such an investigation might have documented how agency employees were defining and coping with the regular disruptions in communication. We can speculate, though, from what ethnomethodologists have found already, that what they did was such things as attribute disruptions to uncontrollable technical problems in the mail system, assume that ultimately information would appear that would make specific case situations make sense (and suspend judgment in the meantime), and "fill in the gaps" intuitively in situations where sufficient information

could not be obtained by the time decisions and actions had to be taken (Pfohl, 1975).

The second story, of the "unintended task force," adds a dramaturgical dimension to this pattern. Not only do people in organizations have to internally process, and thereby compensate for, irrationally occurring gaps in the communication process, they also have to accomplish public role performances that demonstrate that this internal processing is successful. This must be done, of course, in all face-to-face interactions, but it becomes critically important in group settings. Here, employees must assume the stance of actors in an improvisational theater; they must write the play at the very same time that they are speaking their lines. That is, they must extemporaneously create statements preserving the appearance that the role from which they are speaking has integrity. It must seem as if a well-constructed role—not their own is telling them what to say.

An example of this is the university president, who had to lead the task force meeting under the guise of giving it its mission when in fact he had no specific idea of such and indeed had acted in setting up the task force with the intention of allowing the two parties who initiated the idea to define its mission. His task was to appear to state authoritatively, as the institution's leader, what the task force was to do, while in fact evoking it from the department chair. In this case the performance was ineffective, and tensions in the group rose dramatically. This fact only reveals another aspect of the picture: failed performances are compensated for by a disposition on the part of the audience to pretend that the performance achieved the appearance it sought. Hence, members of the audience must actually be actors themselves and present a performance that validates even the most incompetent failures on the part of others in the group.

The third story is a variation on this theme, showing the sometimes astonishing ability that human beings have for requiring norms of appropriateness, as if the maintenance of all social order depended upon them, while at the same time realizing that these norms ultimately mean nothing. The truth about social process revealed here is that the norms themselves are simply a cover for the fact that all social order is improvised on a moment-to-moment basis rather

than directed by norms designed to ensure that such order is maintained. What the Christmas party sex case shows is that norms do not control behavior and create order. Order is achieved because people have ample ability to normalize even the most bizarre infractions of the norms of social appropriateness that inevitably occur in life. This was accomplished here by transforming the outrageous incident into an occasion for instituting an intellectual dialogue framed around issues of professional careerism and political equity.

The last story, of the "X" generation contract employees, illustrates how this ability to normalize can cut with a reverse edge, such that the ethos of rational action on which organizations are supposed to be founded can be collectively undermined. While the work process in this organization was slowly grinding to a standstill, the downsizing episode that had produced the slowing momentum of work was being defined as a resounding success. Given the intrinsic uncertainty and ambiguity of social life in organizations, people are prone to grasp at any definition of the situation that they can reasonably regard as legitimate. Howard Becker has argued that in hierarchically organized social settings, this means that when those at the top of the organization define circumstances, there is a tendency for their statements and actions to be accorded *prima facie* validity (Becker, 1967).

This tendency functions as an essential compensation for the denial in the official model of organizations that people are anything more than rational role players whose personal life worlds do not bear on their performance. It can also result in the validation of essentially dysfunctional definitions of reality, as it did in this case. Top management had declared through its downsizing program that there were too many employees in the organization and that contract workers could do the work as well for less cost. The supervisory staff was collaborating in maintaining this declaration as true, even though their direct experience denied it. In a manner similar to the mail burning case, no doubt, the staff of the organization was compensating for and normalizing a disrupted, malfunctioning work process that they had come to regard as an inevitable "reality."

## Analytic Commentary on the Stories: The Morale

One lesson I think these stories teaches us in the field of public administration is that we are “in denial” about what is really going on within our administrative institutions. The way we talk officially about life in public organizations is rather far from the actual experience of work life lived within them. At one level we all know this, but we keep wanting to forget it. I have many times used the book, *How Public Organizations Work: Learning from Experience* (Bellavita, 1990), as a text in my public administration classes. The book is made up of material written by public administration practitioners, and I have discovered that students find it quite interesting and useful to study. There is one chapter in it which is a case report of “organizational evil” that is quite remarkable. In my experience, both faculty colleagues and student readers of the book consistently raise a question as to whether the case is true. They have difficulty believing that such weird behavior could occur in a formal organization. Indeed they do not want to believe it.

I attribute this to the fact that the picture of organization life drawn in the bulk of the official research literature does not depict it accurately—specifically, in the sense that it tends to suppress information about non-rational behavior or about any behavior that violates the norms of rational organization. The implication of this is that we need, in the field, a different venue for research that can get at the non-rational dimension of administrative life. *Public Voices*, in precisely this sense, is a big step in the right direction. I would call this new venue, “administrative folklore,” and I would argue that we ought to regard such literature as highly important.

An objection could be raised against this proposal that such a literature, with its own research methodology, already exists in the form of interpretivist, especially ethnomethodological, studies of organizations (Weick, ). Indeed, many would say that all the stories told here, and the commentary on them, are simply a form of standard interpretivist analysis. There is some truth to this, but I would argue that interpretivism and ethnomethodology do not address the generic issues involved in creating a literature such as I am suggesting.

Interpretivist approaches have disabled themselves as devices for generating applied knowledge of the sort that we want to develop in the field of public administration. This disablement comes about because the central message of interpretivist approaches is that social reality is a delicate accomplishment of social actors, that it is highly fragile—much like an improvised play—and that because of this people tend to want to objectify (and thereby stabilize) this reality. The final implication of this way of thinking is that only the most conservative approaches to social life are appropriate. All others, it is claimed, tend to do more harm than good, tear down more than they can replace. We must, therefore hold on to what we have (Berger, Berger, & Kellner, 1974).

Interpretivism depicts people as trapped into traditional ways of doing things by their own inability to gain perspective on themselves. The implication of this is that when we do make headway in gaining perspective, we must regard such knowledge as only a kind of curiosity, of peripheral interest, as even Weick's rationalized version of organizational ethnomethodology tends to be regarded in public administration. We feel we must, in short, act as if we do not know that social reality is being constructed on a contingent basis from moment to moment, and that we are proceeding not rationally but through processes of sense making. Our commitment to the rational model of action is the final and greatest dimension of this cover up. By continuing to assume that rationality is possible, we can stay in denial, avoid admitting to ourselves that social reality, social order, indeed, our own identities, are contingent upon our continuing to maintain effective relationships with each other. A literature of folklore might avoid this trap, since it is a traditional form of knowledge that is intended to be applied, to instruct one in the day-to-day living of life.

There is a second, related, and more important lesson in the stories above, though, one that has to do with the possibilities for a new model of action for public administration. The present model, derived from the paradigm of rationalism, can be characterized as the "doing to" schema. You come to me in my role of public administrator, and I will use my expertise to do something to you that is appropriate to your case. Presently administrators feel that the

more definite they can be in doing things, the better. This shows that they are expert and can act effectively to apply their expertise. Citizens tend to feel the same way when they are at one remove from government action. When citizens are reading the newspaper, they want to read of bureaucrats who act decisively and without costly delay, to get things done, and further the public interest. When citizens are in the position of the ones to whom the bureaucrat is doing something, however, their viewpoint tends to be different.

There is a profound reason for this. If life teaches anything unequivocally, it is that definite action is dangerous. We learn early on and through hard experience to "measure twice, cut once." We learn that things can and do go wrong even when we thought we knew the right thing to do. Because mature, sensible people apprehend the dangers in decisive action, we tend to want this type of action only in the abstract. We do not want those acting toward us personally to be so definitely instrumental. We want them to be, as David Farmer puts it, hesitant in doing what they do even to the point of becoming "anti-administrators" (Farmer, 1995). The full dimension of a model of hesitant, arational action remains to be worked out, but it will no doubt mean that public administrators will continue to have to train themselves as experts, but that they will simultaneously have to suspend their faith in their own expertise, place it in doubt, and wonder constantly if it can be applied to the present case. It will mean that administrators will realize that when they act, their actions are neither restoring a problematic situation to an existing normal state, nor moving the status quo toward some desired goal state that has been objectively demonstrated to be good.

Rather, as the stories above suggest, they will need to see themselves as creating a reality for which they are responsible, but over which they cannot have complete control. A literature of administrative folklore would reveal to us that there is room for hesitant action in "rational" bureaucratic institutions, that they are not, as the stories above show, tightly fitted machines of calculation.

Franz Kafka, arguably the premier critic of rational bureaucracy, was, of course, himself a premier bureaucrat, one who had a highly successful career in the Workers Accident Insurance Institution of Bohemia. He was known among his co-workers for a specific kind of

hesitant action, illustrated by the following case from his life. An elderly man came to Kafka, as legal officer in the institution, to petition for the disability pension he was due from an accident at his job in which his leg was crushed by a crane. Kafka saw that the man's petition was rhetorically framed in such a way and invoked certain categories of decision that would result in his case having an unfavorable outcome. Rather than acting, he told the man to return home and reconsider his petition. Subsequently, a leading lawyer in Prague came to the old man's home and suggested that he help him redraft the petition for his case. He did so, and the man returned to Kafka with the new petition. The result now was that the man received a proper pension. Kafka had arranged for the lawyer to help the man (Janouch, 1971).

The point here is that there was room in the machinery of calculation in the Insurance Institution for either decision. Unhesitant action on Kafka's part would have resulted as he saw it in a completely justifiable, legitimate, unjust result. Did the old man, though, deserve the pension? How do we know that it would have been unjust not to have given it to him? There is no objective answer to this question, revealing another dimension of hesitant administrative action: the administrator can only be hesitant, never certain, about the moral correctness of his or her own decisions (Harmon, 1995). What about Kafka's commitment to his profession, the law? Did not his belief in the law's adversarial process demand that he simply take the old man's original petition and respond to it, trusting that the adversarial process would result in a just outcome? Here we see yet another aspect of Kafka's hesitancy: he did not commit himself completely to the belief that the ideology of his profession was "right." He held it, too, in some degree of doubt and suspense and acted instead out of consideration of a combination of legal principle, the facts of the old man's case, his own sentiments, his "impressions" of the old man, etc. In a word, Kafka was an anti-administrator, one who acts administratively, but in a mode that is profoundly hesitant, a hesitancy that is framed by doubt about everything and that accepts the existential difficulty of holding such a position (Harmon, 1995).

## **Conclusion: From Folklore to Anti-Administration**

How do we get from the folklore stories told at the outset to the idea of anti-administration? What the stories tell us is that public organizations do not function as the rational entities that they are depicted to be in the dominant, official organization theory picture of them. Rather, they tend to validate the interpretivist or ethnomethodological perspective on social process, which shows it to be an ongoing theatrical accomplishment in which people figure out appropriate behavior from moment to moment in fundamentally indeterminate situations.

Of course, theoretical interpretations such as this one are always and inevitably controversial, and sensible challenges to them can certainly be raised. Even if one refuses this analysis of the stories, however, an underlying truth still seems to stand out: the picture of reality on which the rational model of administrative action depends for its validity is overly simple to the point of inutility. If organizations carry on their business as the stories suggest, it makes no sense to act as if we can know how things are for certain, can know how they ought to be for certain, can know how to change them for certain, and can then act to bring them about for certain. Social reality is too obscure, human desire and anxiety too pervasive and autonomous, and human communication too approximate and contingent to allow "rational" action to make sense. We would be better advised, if we follow the moral of these stories, to realize that in social life we are all standing in profoundly swampy territory, no one knows where the quicksand is, and to an important extent we each carry others' fates on our backs as we step.

The bottom line, though, does not have to do with the analytic implications of the stories. Rather, what I ultimately want to issue here is a call to create and disseminate an official picture of organizational life that is more complete, more honest, than the one we have now. In my view we need to start discussing and coming to terms with the implications of the slices of organizational life that the very ordinary stories recounted here bring into view. Once we do, we will be unable to maintain our pose as expert technicians who

have the right to decide about and do things to people on the basis of our "expertise." In the process, we will have to drop our instrumentalism and become hesitant actors. We can, however, trust that it will not take citizens very long to become accustomed to and like this way of doing the government's business, and, as a happy consequence to like us, as bureaucrats, a lot better than they do now.

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# Public Administration Discourse As Play With A Purpose

*David John Farmer*

Public administration discourse—thinking about and undertaking administrative activities like directing, coordinating, controlling, revealing, concealing and so on—is play. It is counterproductive not to recognize the implications of the fact that P.A. discourse is a Wittgensteinian language game—or, better, a set of language games. It is a game(s) with a purpose of helping to shape the language games of others, e.g., co-shaping income tax payers' game(s), business entrepreneurs' game(s), and the games of other and frequently overlapping groups. As a language game (a concept we discuss later), the playing is likely to be governed by identifiable rules (or rituals, or ways or patterns of proceeding)—even if it is the pattern (rule) that there will be no rules.

The genuine issue is not whether P.A. discourse is play. Rather, the issue is whether our game is the best for our purposes —whether our game rules are the most fruitful. In the P.A. game, as it is currently constituted and played, some of the socially constructed rules seem beneficial; others—I claim—are unhelpful. I would like us to be more conscious of the constraints imposed by our game's rules and more playful (e.g., creative, imaginative) in changing them. I would like us to be more open to the possibility of play itself as a rule. This is a second sense of the term “play,” suggesting that our language game include a rule (if we opt for rules) that we can change any of the rules. But it means more than merely changing or abandoning the rules of the game. For one thing, it includes being willing to play without being told what the “right” rules are.

For those interested in practical improvements in the macro and longer-term “iron cage” problems of bureaucracy rather than with the important but surface-level, short-run and micro problems of

efficiency and effectiveness (for those more interested in the underlying diseases of bureaucracy than in the diseases' symptoms), I suggest that there is at least one P.A. discourse game which is more hopeful than the language games we have traditionally played. It is a play of ideas and practices that comes from a language game situated in the conceptual space between the postmodern and the modern. It is a game that de-marginalizes play.

A failure to give play its due seems to encourage a misalignment of P.A. discourse with philosophy/poetry; and poetry is used here in a wide sense to include all of the arts and other humanities, all of the non-sciencey. (The misalignment is not a one-way problem; for instance, this century's professionalization of philosophy has had regrettable side-effects.) Adjusting the kilter of such relationships is important if I am right that the prospects of addressing "iron cage" problems of bureaucracy can be expected to improve to the extent that we can correct this and similar misalignments (e.g., between Economics and P.A.), also rooted in play's marginalization.

We can approach our in-between game by asking two questions. First, what part does "play" play in postmodernism? For this and for a view of postmodernism, we can turn to Umberto Eco. He can be read as holding that the archetypical postmodern language game is irony, directed against oppression by the past. Example (offered by Eco, and spoken by a lover to a fresh beloved): "As Barbara Cartland would put it, 'I love you madly.'" Richard Rorty's account of irony and Jean-Francois Lyotard's account of re-writing provide one basis for understanding Eco—and to a prospect for practical benefits from a postmodern P. A. language game.

Second, what part can "play" play in modernism? For this, we can turn to Ludwig Wittgenstein and to his account of language gaming. We will find that the archetypical modernist game is a particular way of understanding the riddle genre. Example: "What kind of ears does a train have? Engineers." We will find the prospect of practitioner benefits in being more conscious of the limits of a language game dominated by riddling—when riddling is understood as a paradigm of discovery. One of the rules of this P.A. play option is that, while some games are decidedly better than others, there is no one "right" game. The economist, with the rules of her game, sees problems as

economic problems; the sociologist sees problems as sociological problems; the psychologist sees... and so on. Looking at Henry Knolle loading pig iron, Frederick Taylor sees a different "Schmidt" than would a New Public Administrationist. I tried to capture this in my earlier "reflexive language paradigm" (Farmer, 1995). That paradigm was described as individual and group engagement in a process of playful and attuned dialogue with the underlying content of the language of public bureaucracy. It was explained as an art that examines the set of assumptions and social constructions that constitute the theoretical lens through which we see, and it speculates about alternative sets of lenses. Why do we see (know) what we see (know), and are there alternatives?

There are problems with playing, whether postmodern or modern. For each category, the problems start with the fact that its language gaming is a weapon. Postmodern language gaming is directed against oppression; its spiritual force is a radical and ecstatic liberation ethic, consistent with the philosophical skepticism which is at its philosophical core. It is concerned with the oppression of marginalized voices, like those of women, minorities, bearers of policed sexualities, the economically and politically colonized, and others. No "progress allows us to be unaware that never, in absolute numbers, have so many men, women, and children been enslaved, starved, or exterminated on the earth" (Derrida, 1993, p. 141). Derrida opposes the joyful celebrants of the triumphant new world order, capitalism and liberal democracy, and points to the possibility of a "new International" of the dispossessed. His heart and his head ache at the thought of the world's gaping inequalities. Right or wrong, there is no nihilism, no 'idle' play, in such a postmodern intention. Instead, there is a burning sense of "justice, if there is such a thing."

For the modernist, language gaming is no less a weapon, directed against the sub-optimal. Jurgen Habermas tells us that modernity is directed toward rationalization, ever greater rationality that is supposed inevitably to produce more and more human happiness and moral goodness. P.A. discourse, to the extent that it is limited to being a modernist project, is concerned with greater efficiency (effectiveness, responsiveness). This concern is sought in a variety of

contexts, like closed and open systems; but the central focus of the language game remains to optimize.

So strong is this modernist rationalizing impulse that “play” itself has a politically incorrect image, even though we modernists play a lot. That playing appears antithetical to this impulse is perhaps clearest in sites of modernist rationalizing like capitalism and professionalism. Playing seems unhelpful to the capitalist spirit of exploiting natural and human resources in order to maximize profits; hard work is the order of the era. Playboys (playgirls) and the entrepreneurial spirit seem at odds; it sounds odd to claim that “Henry deserves all his accumulated wealth, because he is a playaholic.” Play seems unhelpful in an era of professionalizing (where even cat groomers and travel agents professionalize—and therefore “profess” to know). Doing science and technology—and administering financial and human resources—seem foreign to playing. Playing seems especially alien to action disciplines (like mainstream American P.A.) which overemphasize short-term practical pay-offs, because John Huizinga is right (in his book “Homo Ludens” on man as a playing animal) that something operates in play that transcends immediate life needs. It is contrary to modernist common sense to translate “study hard” and “work hard” as, respectively, “study playfully” and “play at work.”

We cannot blame play’s bad image entirely on modernity, however. At least two further sources exist. First, the bad image also results from the misidentification of “play” with “playing around”—with being neither serious nor requiring talent. On the contrary, some games are better than others, and some players are stronger than others. There is a long marginalized history celebrating the significance of playing, and this is not surprising because we can see the importance of play in a wide range of work, e.g., in work like hunting, eating, mating and learning. This history extends to the pre-Socratics; and so we find Heraclitus writing that “Lifetime is a child playing draughts; the kingship belongs to a child.” We find it in Schiller and, of course, in Nietzsche; and it is striking that Schiller could say that “man is only truly himself when he is at play.”

There is an especially helpful account of play in Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer sees play as a mode of being, rather than in the

subjective terms of Kant and of Schiller. Among the features he identifies in the ontology of the different senses of play are a naturalness; a to-and-fro movement (e.g., as in the play of fountains, the play of gnats, the play of forces); movement renewing itself in repetition and unconnected with a goal; a relation with an other (even in *solitaire* where the relation is not with a human); losing its purpose unless the player loses herself in her play; a risky activity (because the player can be trapped by the fascination of the play); and an activity with a closed character (e.g., sometimes the more it is done for an audience, the less it is play—whether in sporting or in religious play). Another feature which Gadamer identifies is a “lack of decisiveness in the playing consciousness, which makes it absolutely impossible to decide between belief and non-belief” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 96). This is what I intended in the “reflexive language paradigm” by saying that a P.A. player should adopt an “as if” attitude toward first-order and second-order perspectives. It is not necessary to be a postmodernist (or critical theorist, or a believer in any other second-order framework) to use the postmodern (critical theory, or other) perspective. It is not necessary to believe in economics (or other first-order views) to use an economics (or other) perspective, although it is necessary to know some economics, etc. The playing of “as if” requires neither belief nor non-belief; the player is in the world of the game.

Second, the bad image results no less from the mistaken view that work as a category is primary to play, and that (play being a matter only of indulgence) it is dangerous to play when work is required but that there is no danger in working when playing is required. Many times, play seems to me not only inappropriate but also abhorrent—as when responding to a distress call, when helping a friend, when consoling hurt. A trouble is that the need for hard work in some circumstances tends to drive out the need for play in any circumstances, even though being more open to the possibilities for play is not the same as never working. Such confusions add to the negative connotations of play, a concept already marginalized by the ethos of modernity—as it was in the medieval period by such factors as religious demands and economic scarcities.

So potent are these negative connotations that it might well not pay for individuals to confess that they play, even if they find play useful for P.A. thinking and practice. They should follow the practice of my one-time colleague in the bureaucracy who, whenever greeted ("How are you?"), unfailingly, breathlessly and seriously would reply, "Working hard, working hard." This is a safer course than the more socially useful one of Reconstructing the dichotomy between work and play.

## Postmodernism's Irony, or Re-Writing

I want to focus on one part which "play" plays in postmodernism, and this is on the archetypal postmodern form of play—irony. The play of irony is a weapon that postmodernists use in seeking liberation from the constraining effects of conceptual categories and metaphors, because they hold that a failure to Reconstruct texts results in human suffering. There should be no objection to a sensitive use of (say) categories in developing important "little t truths," truths within a language or a way of life. But it is part of postmodernism's philosophical skepticism that the categories of a language do not guarantee non-contingent (or transcendental) Big T truth, the whole and complete truth about reality as it is in itself. Undeconstructed categories mean that we get "facts" not quite right. The "not quite right" is positively harmful. Aristotle's and Augustine's failure to deconstruct the socially constructed categories of man and woman, for instance, certainly encouraged the marginalization of women.

Truths which seem to be interpretation-free facts are shown, through deconstruction, to depend on hidden assumptions (oppositions and metaphors) manufactured by the language used. The difficulty is that the distorting oppositions and misleading metaphors are unavoidable—remove one and there are plenty more, including the latent. Public administration theory and practice are, no less, distorted by binary categorical oppositions and metaphors. Examples of such oppositions are politics and administration, male and female, government and non-government, etc. Examples of metaphors can be readily found in the public administration literature, e.g., machines, organic growth, etc. Examples of

underlying narratives are the notions of efficiency and (as if P.A. discourse functions not in the world of opinion but of Platonic knowledge) of a P.A. discipline of "objective facts."

Play of irony suggests a counterpart in P.A. discourse. For one thing, it is to write and rewrite in the in-between. It is not wrong to examine (to write about) our institutions and our programs from the management or policy-making perspective—from the prince's perspective. It is not wrong to write general histories from our own perspectives; we write about American history (British, French history, etc) from the perspective of the United States (Britain, France, etc.). But the single perspective is not enough. Homi Bhabha makes this point about British colonial relations, pointing out that even such a lover of liberty as John Stuart Mill gets it wrong by being imperial-centered (Bhabha, 1994). The histories of our institutions and our programs (e.g., the post office or the welfare program) also need rewriting from the perspective of outsiders to these institutions and programs. It needs rewriting—a different set of perspectives—from the vantage point of the in-between that lies between the texts of the institution/programs and the texts (stories) of the outsiders to these programs. Think of a "Leonard B. White history" of administrative institutions written from the perspectives of those outside those institutions—and from the vantage point between the latter perspectives and that of the institutions themselves. Think of a history of the Bureau of Indian Affairs or of Medicaid written from multiple de-centered perspectives. The argument might run that this play of perspectives parallels not only the play of irony but also the inevitably multi-cultural world in which we live.

"Rewriting modernity," of which conceptually this rewriting public administration is a part, is a term which Jean-Francois Lyotard prefers rather than "postmodern." Lyotard describes "rewriting" as similar to Freud's notion of "working through." It is not an attempt to grasp the past correctly, to reveal it as it really is. It is akin to free association, involving similar attitudes toward the task and toward what is discovered. The similar attitudes toward the task include suspending judgment, being patient, and giving attention to everything that happens. The similar attitude toward the discovered is that, for both Lyotard and Freud, what is discovered is not

knowledge. As Lyotard writes, "Contrary to remembering, working through would be defined as a work without end and therefore without will: without end in the sense in which it is not guided by the concept of an end—but not without finality" (Lyotard, 1991, p. 30). Rewriting public administration in this way would mean re-interpretation where, in Lyotard's phrase (1991, p. 35), "rewriting means resisting the rewriting of that supposed postmodernity."

In his "Postscript" to "The Name of the Rose," Umberto Eco offers an account of postmodernism that provides, among other things, for the view that modern and postmodern moments can coexist. Eco claims in this postmodern novel (where his murder mystery story line suddenly transposes into a Reconstruction of the literary itself) that postmodernism does not involve an *avant-garde* denial of the past. Rather, it is an ironic—or playful—treatment of the past. Eco's account can be filled out.

Eco's view that modern and postmodern moments, in varying degrees of intensity, can co-exist is not unusual. Lyotard went further, suggesting that the postmodern precedes the modern (Lyotard, 1984, p. 79). Following Nietzsche and Jung, recall yet again the old story of the Delphic Oracle. For nine months of the year, the Delphic Oracle was the province of Apollo, the god of reason and order. For three months of the year, the oracle was the site of the worship of Dionysus, associated with unreason, orgies and frenzy. The suggestion is that these are two sides of human nature, where the Apollonian corresponds to modernity and the Dionysian corresponds to the postmodern. Eco's view of the coexistence of the modern and the postmodern can be made consistent with the notion that we are entering an era of postmodernity. In this case, characteristics of the modern will be submerged—but not obliterated—by postmodernity's characteristics.

For Eco, the focus of postmodernism is the past. Eco writes that the "past conditions us, harries us, blackmails us"—and we have moments of crisis, of having to deal with the past. Postmodernism's focus is the past because postmodernists have a strong sense of the embedded nature of human existence and action. Our thinking and our individuality are socially constructed by what has gone before. But Eco wants to say more than this. The past harries and blackmails

us. We are oppressed by our embeddedness; we want to transcend the constraints of the past.

Eco claims that there are two alternative responses in coming to grips with this past. The historic *avant-garde* response "tries to settle scores with the past..." It "destroys, defaces the past..." Then the *avant-garde* goes further, destroys the figure, cancels it, arrives at the abstract, the informal, the white canvas, the slashed canvas, the charred canvas. In... literature, the destruction of the flow of discourse, the Burroughs-like collage, silence, the white page; in music, the passage from atonality to noise to absolute silence..." (1983, p. 530).

The other response is, for Umberto Eco, the postmodern. Eco describes it as an ironic approach conducted in an age of lost innocence. "Irony, meta-linguistic play, enunciation squared." As Eco puts it, "with the postmodern, it is possible not to understand the game and yet to take it seriously. Which is, after all, the quality (the risk) of irony." The postmodern reply to the past—to the embedded—is to revisit it with irony, not innocently. His example is declaring love. He writes that one cannot say "I love you madly" to a cultivated woman, "because he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland." What the man can say is, "As Barbara Cartland would put it, I love you madly." He has said what he wants to say, but he has said it "in an age of lost innocence."

There is, of course, a third alternative, and this is the sort of approach adopted by Jurgen Habermas—leading exponent of the second generation of critical theorists. Habermas holds that modernity is "an incomplete project," and that the difficulties of modernity can be resolved as language makes itself suitable for the communication that is needed between people. His emphasis is on intersubjectivity and shared meanings.

There is an immense literature on irony and considerable work has been done in analyzing its multifarious forms, purposes, conditions and aspects. The traditional conception of irony is primarily a mixture of the ideas of Plato, Aristotle, Cicero and Quintilian. It includes the opposing of a surface reading to an underlying reading.

Example: a reader of Derrida or de Man might say with irony, "Postmodernism is certainly easy to rationalize." The purposes of traditional irony include praise, criticism, humor and contempt, and the general attitude to irony was negative. For example, for Plato, it was mocking deception. But there were other purposes and attitudes, as instanced by Socratic irony. Aristotle also uses duality to describe irony in such terms as praise-by-blame or blame-by-praise. Quintilian explains that irony is not merely the opposite of what one means; it is saying something different. Traditional irony includes a two-word trope, an entire speech, or (Socrates again) an entire life. The modern literature on irony includes new understandings about categories and conditions. For instance, some write about the psychoanalytic aspects of irony, in spite of Freud's claim that irony can be explained without reference to the unconscious. Some criticize the traditional characterization of irony, e.g., irony seems to have no easily identifiable independent criteria.

This literature has explored the relationship between irony and other linguistic categories, like parody, satire and metaphor —also genres concerned with the relationships between texts. Parody is described variously, for example, as a critical quotation of texts with the effect of ridicule and as bitextual synthesis which may or may not include ridicule. Thinkers have explored the relationship to burlesque, travesty, pastiche, plagiarism, lies, quotation, and allusion.

Of the types of irony, deconstructive irony seems the most relevant in discussing the postmodern. We can join Kierkegaard (who wrote a dissertation on irony—and with irony) in leaving aside rhetorical irony. For Kierkegaard, irony is an existential stance, and its advantage is freedom. "In irony, the subject is continually retreating, taking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself—that is, in order to preserve itself in negative independence of everything" (Kierkegaard, 1989, p.257).

Deconstructive irony is related to the Derridean project, aiming at indeterminacy or undecidability. "The old definition of irony—saying one thing and meaning another—is superseded; irony is saying something in a way that activates not one but an endless series of subversive interpretations" (Muecke, 1985, p. 100). In understanding deconstructive irony, it is not necessary to embrace extreme views

like those of Paul de Man—whose 1979 account (not a simple one) includes the idea that irony is the “systematic undoing” of understanding. We must guard against a false ‘rationalizing down’ of the Derridean sting. Derrida does want to liberate the signifier; he denies that significant discourse requires that the signifier refer to something stable and definite. He does see reason as a tyrant who cannot be overthrown from within. Like Cleitophon who declines to enter Socrates’ logos game (in two of Plato’s dialogues—in the disputed “Cleitophon” and in the “Republic”), Derrida will not play the logocentric game. Alert to the risks of ‘rationalizing down,’ deconstructive irony nevertheless can be understood as concerned with the systematic undoing of traditional non-skeptical understandings. The indeterminacy or undecidability can be interpreted not as between the surface and the latent meaning. Rather, the position of the ironist can be to read the indeterminacy as between the attempt to fix a meaning and the impossibility of doing it.

Richard Rorty explains the position of the ironist as one who recognizes the finitude of the human condition. Rorty’s ironist is one who has radical and continuing doubts about her language (with its concepts and metaphors) as a final vocabulary for enabling the knower to know the thing-in-itself. Yet the ironist’s contingent language is not unproductive—it works for everyday pragmatic purposes. Rorty’s ironist recognizes that “anything can be made good or bad by being redescribed... (and they are) never quite able to take themselves seriously because (they are) always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change” (Rorty, 1989, pp. 73–74). It was in such terms that Rorty (1982, pp. 90–109) earlier explained the Derridean view of philosophy as a kind of writing.

### **P.A. as a Language Game: Riddling as One Option**

What part can “play” play in modernism? For this, we should turn to Wittgenstein and his account of language gaming. We will find that there are disadvantages in limiting ourselves to a particular form of the riddling language game.

There are practical constraints militating against play. The degree of freedom enjoyed by a P.A. discourser to change the rules of her language game depends upon external and internal constraints. Working under the pre-reformed gaze of supervisor Scrooge in "Christmas Carol," Dickens' Bob Cratchit experienced severe external constraints. It may well be that the freedom to play in P.A. discourse is in inverse proportion to a series of external factors—such as the lowness of one's level in a hierarchy (Napoleon having more freedom than one of his grunts), the narrowness of one's scope of responsibilities (macro duties facilitating more freedom than micro duties), and the pressure felt to produce immediate practical results ("get on with it"—"don't play around"). Then there are internal constraints. Scrooge subjected Scrooge himself to internal constraints—before the series of ghosts gave him a jolt. Such constraints include one's extent of risk aversion, strength of conviction that one knows the right (e.g., pro-choice and anti-abortion picketers are unlikely to be playful), depth of cynicism (e.g., "Those who try different things get burned in the end"), and lack of imagination.

Granting the difficulties, nevertheless P.A. discourse does miss opportunities for play that other disciplines have pursued. Modernist economic theory, concerned with topics no less "practical" than Public Administration, is constructed with the play of deductive and hypothetical modeling. Meanwhile P.A. discourse has embraced only at arms' length the hypothetical modeling of Public Choice Economics. Isaac Newton, like other physicists, indulged in the play of thought experiments. Why are thought experiments not more common in P.A? Even the kind of administrative and managerial play specified in Alice Rivlin's systematic and natural experimentation has proven still-born.

P.A. theory/practice has the characteristics of language gaming. It is a game that is linked to action; it has ends in itself, and it is rule-governed. These characteristics echo Wittgenstein's three objectives in using the term "language game."

First, Wittgenstein wants to stress the connection between language and action. He explains that the term "language game" stresses the fact that speaking a language is part of an activity or a form of life.

To claim that P.A. discourse is a language game is not to suggest that it all reduces to mere word-smithing. For one thing, it is not necessary to hold a thin view of language. P.A. language, on a thick view of language, involves not only a means for speaking/hearing (writing/reading) about p.a. but also what is theorized and thought about p.a. That a thick view is reasonable is reflected in the literature on the relationship of language and thinking. For instance, are not abstractions (like concepts, theories and thoughts) about public administration—or anything else—impossible without language? Is it not impossible to speak/hear/think about a notion like “efficiency” without language? A thick view of language is consistent with the claim that our innermost reflections and our outermost public declarations are necessarily conducted in language terms, just as Jacques Lacan tells us that the structure of the unconscious is language. The limits of my world (after Wittgenstein) really are the limits of my language, understanding language in a thick sense.

Second, Wittgenstein holds that language is an end in itself; language use involves a wide variety of activities. As Judith Genova comments, “To keep that activity as open and non-functional as possible, Wittgenstein lights on the simile of the game. ‘Game’ here does the same work as it does for Gadamer or Derrida. Instead of thinking of language as work, as something toward some end, it focuses on the activity itself as an end in itself” (Genova, 1995, p. 117). Wittgenstein does not define a language game. Rather he lists examples, which he thinks are connected by family resemblances. They are connected not by something distinctive and common to all but rather by a series of overlapping similarities. On similar lines, P.A. discourse can serve a plethora of ends and non-ends. Do you not recall playing practitioner language games involving many “useful” activities that served no end beyond the bureaucratic activity itself? The activities certainly had stated purposes. To give humble examples, who has not attended a meeting that had no real end beyond the holding of the meeting? I remember someone preparing an elaborate master plan where there was no valid goal beyond preparing an elaborate master plan. I remember (in the “good” old days) a staff laboring to prepare an MBO statement for its unit, seeing the statement reduced to a sentence as it was absorbed into the MBO statement for the umbrella unit, seeing the sentence disappear to extinction in the maw

of the super-umbrella structure's verbiage. It is misleading to dismiss such examples as nothing but waste.

Third, Wittgenstein wants to emphasize that using language is playing according to rules, and he wants us to have the right attitude toward these rules. As Genova puts it, "game includes the notion of rules; speaking is play according to rules." Contrasted with work, the "difference is that in games and play the rules and the point are both flexible" (Genova, 1995, p. 117).

Let us assume that some rules are desirable. What are the rules of our own (my, your) language game? Is there not an undesirable inflexibility toward some or all of the rules in the typical bureaucratic situation? Is there not too much inflexibility in thinking about public administration? The first task is to identify our own rules.

Here are selected ground rules applying to many practitioners working within agencies in, say, the U.S. Government. Let us just think of the general run of professional, technical and middle management personnel (perhaps between the levels of about GS-9 and GS-15 or so), and let us think of the typical civil servant working in an office "within the Beltway." Clearly, there are many varieties —and, for each of the exceptions, sets of rules could be specified that fit those particular cases.

Many agencies have rigid rules controlling the place of work—for controlling the location of the employee's body. Turning up at the office or work station on work days, except when out of the office for an approved reason (e.g., official travel, going to a meeting, etc.), is a common guideline. Some have other rules governing the location of the work (or body), like:

- No employee should be idle during office hours.
- An employee should work for X hours per week, needed or not.

Some supervisors, particularly for lower level employees, attach great importance to employees being on time in the morning. They value morning-promptness more than, say, employee creativity.

Agencies have explicit and/or implicit rules establishing the relation of the employee to her supervisor—and thus subordination to the system. For example, such rules might include:

An employee must have a boss, just as every boss must have a super-boss.

If the boss specifies that the work should be done in a specified way, an employee is obligated to do it that way—unless she can justify the deviation.

Some might give a different emphasis, by saying that every employee is obligated to follow standard operating procedures, unless the boss directs otherwise or unless the employee can justify exceptions.

- An employee is obligated to keep her boss informed about her work activities.
- An employee who is a team player and who “fits in” is preferred.
- An employee is a “skill set” who, in an ideal situation, should match her assigned job description.
- An employee should stick to her assigned job.
- An employee should work within the limits of the organization chart, and she should exhibit loyalty to her own organizational unit.

The consequence, unintended I suppose, is that not only the behavior but also the thinking of the employee is limited by both direction and rewards. This is not to say that public employees are limited. It is to say that the system encourages them to be limited. An employee is expected to think about her program activities within the parameters established by her boss or by standard operating procedures (or attitudes).

Turn now to the rules which people apply to themselves when they think (or theorize) about public administration issues. Clearly, there are many exceptions. The following are seven from among those which could be listed. In my view, they are hindrances. But that is not the point. The real point is that anyone thinking about and discussing public administration, even if they themselves are willing

to change these rules, must be cognizant that the likely audience expects adherence to such rules.

- Causal is preferred to interpretive analysis, and theory is at best suspect.
- A primary criterion of practicality is whether proposed solutions are obvious to common sense.
- The inductive method is preferred; the deductive is regarded as largely irrelevant.
- Scientific propositions are regarded as giving greater epistemological assurance than non-scientific propositions; and thus personal experience is suspect, and social science findings are preferred to “facts” derived from literary, artistic or other sources.
- The identity crisis of public administration is limited to the politics-administration dichotomy. This is despite the role of business and of capitalism in relation to government.
- Findings that have a direct connection with a micro practitioner concern (or findings that have clear immediate or short-run pay-offs) are preferred, encouraged by the fact that many p.a. students and practitioners are mid-level employees.
- Claims of social theory and philosophy are regarded as suspect unless (again) their immediate and micro practitioner relevance is clear.

The predominant play in the modernist P.A. language game is the riddle, when riddling is understood as a paradigm of discovery—as constituting a perceptual breakthrough to an underlying truth or reality. The Sphinx’s riddle solved by Oedipus is a classic example. Riddle—“What being, with only one voice, has sometimes two feet, sometimes three, sometimes four, and it is weakest when it has the most?” Oedipus’s answer—“Man.” The tragedy of Oedipus has been interpreted as resulting from his thinking that life is a riddle, a problem to be solved. Richard Rorty’s distinction (1982, pp. xivxv) between the search for truth and the search for Truth makes it clearer how I understand Oedipus’ tragedy and what I mean by the

riddle as a paradigm of discovery. Little t truth is truth within a language or a way of life; Big T truth is the ultimate and complete truth. When Oedipus solved the riddle of the sphinx, his answer was not proffered as a small t truth. Such riddles involve finding the one, true and hitherto secret answer. Children especially love riddles (Example: Q—when is a door not a door? A—when it is a jar); it fits their binary sense of truth-falsity about the world. The version of Philosophy of Science embraced by Herbert Simon and like-thinkers would see the scientific method as a sort of high-powered Oedipus. It solves riddles, like the “riddles of the universe.” The form of riddle in mind is the paradigm of discovery, where big T Truth is found. Much P.A. gaming is intended to reveal “the Big T True” answers about things like budgeting and personnel.

The literature about riddles specifies topologies, and it includes analyzing the riddle’s relationship to other genres like metaphors and proverbs. In one typology, the metaphorical is a type, like Oedipus’ riddle. There is also the linguistic or grammatical riddle, like the “door ajar” riddle just given; some riddles are oral, and others are visual. The point of this (and the warning in this) for P.A. discourse is that the riddle is not only a paradigm of discovery but also it is about language. The role of language as central for epistemology is now widely understood, including not only postmoderns but also critical theorists like Habermas and (as evidenced by Wittgenstein) many analytical philosophers. When we see the world, what we see is co-shaped by our language and the thing-in-itself. It is reasonable to suppose that we cannot know the thing-in-itself, independently of our wet computers (our brains) which are formatted with language. Arguably, much modernist P.A. discourse has proceeded in independence of developments in Philosophy of Science. Has not mainstream modernist Public Administration unduly limited itself to a particular form of the riddling game? The “undue” is worsened if construction and interpretation are more significant than discovery in terms of coping with the core bureaucratic problems. The signifier of a riddle is not the question but the question-answer unit, and the signified of much riddling is the mystery of our linguistic code, rather than “reality as it is.” Example: “What are big ants?—Giants.” The linguistic component is less obvious in other cases, like Oedipus’ riddle.

## Summary

The paper suggested that at least one playful P.A. language game is more helpful than our traditional game, and this is located in the conceptual space between the postmodern and the modern. The play of irony characteristic of postmodernity—deconstructive irony—was discussed in terms of Umberto Eco's, Jean-Francois Lyotard's and Richard Rorty's accounts. A practical P.A. implication was shown to lie in the writing and re-writing about institutional practices from a de-centered perspective. It was indicated that, even in modernity, P.A. discourse has avoided opportunities for useful play that other disciplines have followed. The idea of P.A. discourse as a language game was discussed, and examples of rules used in P.A. theorizing and practice were offered. It was suggested that these game rules could be modified, and it was explained what it means to suggest that modernist P.A. discourse has been modeled too much on a form of riddling.

This paper has suggested that P.A. discourse should take a turn from "work that too often fails" to serious "play." Purposes could well include addressing more energetically the intractable core problems of bureaucracy, rather than limiting ourselves to short-run and micro issues. Another could be to reflect more appropriately the multi-culturalism of the P.A. context, because good playing is a way of listening to other voices. It is relatively easy to make the case that P.A. thinking should exhibit the same kind of creativity, imagination and spontaneity that is expected from, say, a physicist or even a writer. Why should we not privilege imagination, creativity, and spontaneity—leading features of play—in bureaucratic practice?

Or, does all of the above feel too much like play?

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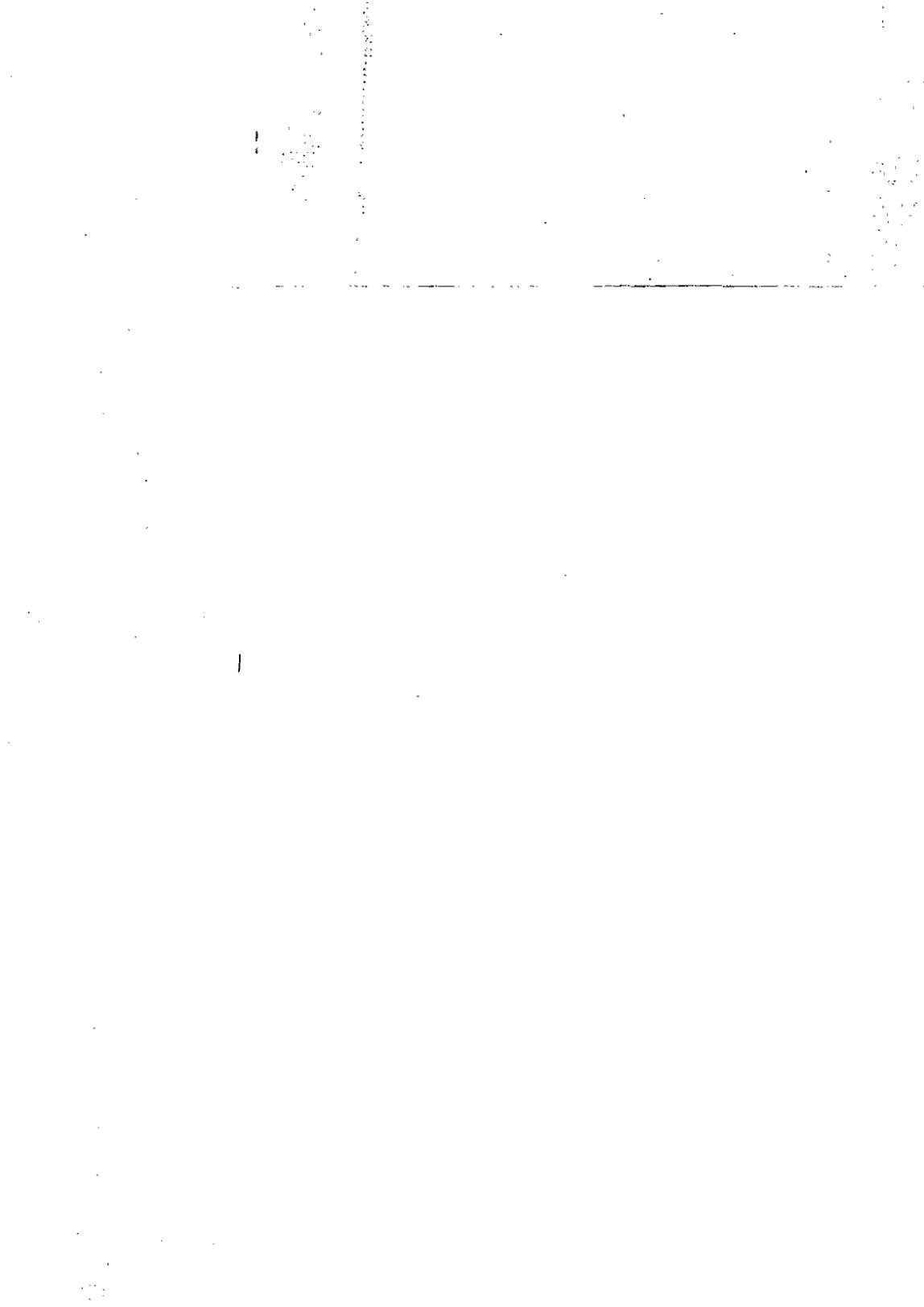
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# **The Practice of Feminisms and Public Administration**

*Janet R. Hutchinson*

## **Introduction**

Feminist critique in the public administration literature has been extremely limited. Following a brief flurry of activity in the 1970s, when feminist issues were discussed largely in the context of equity issues in employment, the voices of women have been raised in mainstream journals only more recently, and rarely from a feminist perspective. This absence of attention to feminist issues in the field may be due in part to the late start women have experienced in ascending to positions of authority in public administration practice, and the very recent increase in the number of women academics holding tenured positions in departments of public administration. It may also be that women in public administration are unwilling to risk censure by their male colleagues if they lay claim publicly to their feminism. And, of course, some simply do not identify themselves as feminists.

A recent analysis of articles appearing in selected public administration journals found that, where feminist approaches were identifiable, the liberal feminist approach was dominant. That is, claims for equality are shaped by pleas for affirmative action, and against "glass ceilings" and sexual harassment in the work place. Arguments are framed in a legal context, based on the rights of the individual (woman) to achieve parity in the workplace, not on any recognition of, or desire to change the fundamental disparities inherent in a patriarchal society (Condit & Hutchinson, 1997.) One could argue that women in the public administration workforce, socialized in the public administration tradition of the liberal state, find it difficult to articulate experienced discriminatory practices in forums other than those prescribed through laws and formal

procedures. One's faith is placed in the neutral state as the arbiter of competing interests even though, as liberal feminists are quick to point out, the state is not neutral and women do not have full rights of citizenship. Although the liberal feminists' recognition of the state's lack of gender-neutrality has produced redress on some issues through political action and legislative reforms, the liberal view of the state is criticized by other feminists as insufficient to account for women's oppression. "Instead of placing patriarchy at the center of this analysis, the liberal feminist view contains an implicit sex role theory, which suggests that changing the attitudes and behavior of men and women will lead to redress of state-sponsored oppression" (H. Eisenstein, 1985, quoted in Mills & Tancred, 1994, p. 115).

It is my intention in this paper, to touch on several dominant feminist theories in relation to their adherents' criticisms of the liberal feminist paradigm, and to introduce the notion of seriality, a reconceptualization of Sartre's social collectivity suggested by postmodern feminist and political theorist, Iris M. Young, as an alternative lens through which issues of public administration might fruitfully be viewed.

## **The Liberal Paradigm and its Critics**

Today, the challenge facing those of us interested in learning how feminist theory can inform the field of public administration is gaining some understanding of what has, in recent years, become an increasingly complex exchange among feminist theorists about approaches to 'the woman question'. The dominant approaches (there are others) are generally described as liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, cultural, socialist, existentialist, and postmodern; it should be noted that these are not neat categorical distinctions, but rather labels of convenience. More recently, contemporary feminist theories are generalized in three thematic streams: liberal feminism, the women-centered standpoint theories, and the power/knowledge nexus of postmodernism. Indeed, the streams of thought that once appeared to be contained within their ideological banks have become blurred, a watery metaphor that seems particularly apt for describing the ebb and flow, the confluence's of feminist thought.

We are reminded by historian, Joan Wallach Scott, that feminism, as a political and social movement in the US, reemerged in the 1960s along with the civil rights movement and subsequent federal policies aimed at expanding opportunities for women both in the professions and the academy. Equal opportunities for women became the rhetorical standard around which women united in a shared desire to end their oppression and claim their right to control their bodies and their lives. Publication of Simone de Beauvoir's seminal book, *The Second Sex*, (by which she meant that man is *self*, and as self, man has defined woman as *other*) gave a new generation of women the impetus to examine their relationship to otherness and to raise themselves from the subsidiary role she so dramatically defined. Following de Beauvoir's work, the quest began for a unifying feminist theory that would explain the causes for women's otherness.

The current wave of feminist theories (since the 1960s) developed, in part, in reaction to the liberal tradition articulated by Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill, both of whom made the case for giving women the same opportunities and entitlements that men customarily enjoy as a birthright—arguing in the main for equal, but not preferential treatment. Contemporary supporters of the classical liberal approach, which makes a case for legal-based gender-justice, are joined by those who advocate for welfare and androgynous approaches, the former arguing for preferential treatment for women until such time that true equality has been achieved, and the latter seeking to redefine traditional sex roles to emphasize the 'best' traits of both sexes for both sexes. The liberal feminist is generally characterized as one who accepts the Enlightenment notions that translate into the rational, capable individualist-woman who accepts responsibility for herself and her destiny, who is committed to personal freedom, and who, in demanding equality, is subject to both equal opportunities and equal treatment.

Dissatisfaction with liberal feminists' failure to deal adequately with class biases that effectively segregate women into low wage jobs led some feminists in the 1960s and 1970s to seek alternative solutions in Marxism (See Jagger, 1983.) From a Marxist feminists' standpoint, women's exclusion from meaningful production is in

direct relation to the capitalist exploitation of power relations. Alienating class structures are seen as particularly destructive for women whose experiences as wives and mothers are trivialized as secondary to the public production of goods and services, and whose work outside the home is relegated to low status, low wage jobs. Although Marxist feminists have advocated variously for the socialization of domestic work, for wages and benefits for household work, and for comparable worth in the work place, none of these reforms is viewed as more than tokenism since fundamental redress of women's oppression cannot be achieved in a capitalist state. Marxist feminists see these reforms as strategic since, as women enter the workforce in increasing numbers their dual relationships to the domestic (private) and public spheres will result in increased dissatisfaction and a desire for revolutionary change. However, feminists within and outside its ranks have also criticized Marxist support of feminist issues on grounds that issue selectivity serves the self-interest of men, as well as women, and belies a fundamental unwillingness to confront issues of male domination (Jagger, 1983 p. 228).

Socialist feminism is described by Catherine MacKinnon as Marxism applied to women, liberal feminism as liberalism applied to women and radical feminism as real feminism (MacKinnon, 1983 p. 181). Perhaps the least understood and most vilified of feminists by critics of feminism, the views of radical feminists on reproduction, motherhood, gender and sexuality spring from the conviction that the oppression of women is the worst and most wide-spread form. Arguing variously for androgyny, lesbianism, and the reclaiming of female sexuality from male dominance, radical feminists are in large part responsible for bringing the feminist project into the realm of public debate.

The liberal feminist commitment to the inviolability of private life, has inspired considerable discussion on the conceptual distinctions between the public and private spheres. Using the Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings and the matter of alleged sexual harassment to make her point, radical feminist Nancy Fraser argues that the asymmetries in the public and private spheres are not concerned with women's relegation to the

private sphere and thereby with their lack of public-sphere participation, but rather women's inability to enforce boundaries between public and private by virtue of their lesser power, their greater vulnerability to intrusive public scrutiny, and the difficulty women experience in defining and defending their privacy. Thomas could declare his privacy 'off-limits' but Anita Hill's privacy could not be privileged since her credibility became the focus of debate.

For Fraser, the patriarchal social system privatizes practices like sexual harassment, and other forms of discrimination, including racial discrimination by holding up for vilification and further harassment, those who would make their claims public. Members of subordinated social groups either by gender, class or sexual orientation, are named by Nancy Fraser as subaltern counterpublics who operate in "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses" (1995, p. 293). It is the feminist subaltern counterpublics naming of sexual harassment and the insistence that sexual harassment was not innocent flirting but a gross abuse of power, that propelled sexual harassment into the public sphere for public debate.

Publics include, of course, relationships where domination is effectively disguised in work groups, project teams, and similar configurations designed to "get everyone on board" as team players. As Jane Mansbridge notes (Mansbridge in Fraser, 1995 p. 289) subtle forms of control of the dominant group over the subordinate group are exercised with the transformation of the pronoun 'I' into the pronoun "we", with the result that subordinate groups are in effect rendered speechless. The liberal notion of bracketing differences, e.g., inequalities, cannot overcome the subtleties of style and decorum which function informally to marginalize subordinate groups.

Various women-centered standpoint theories, labeled gynocentric feminism by Young (1990 p. 161) have taken liberal feminism to task for assuming incorrectly that women *want* to be like men; others assert that women who are not white and middle class, because of inherent race and class biases, are effectively excluded and alienated from the liberal feminist project. Still others are concerned that the

liberal value of privacy masks the domination of women in their personal relationships.

Although many feminists have given up on the quest for an overarching theory of feminism that seeks a single cause of sexism, others remain committed to "a putatively unitary, primary, culturally universal type of activity associated with women, generally an activity conceived as 'domestic' and located in 'the family'." (Fraser & Nicholson, 1988 p. 95) Nancy Chodorow, for example, advanced the argument that "mothering" is a cross-cultural activity that unites women whose deep sense of the self is relational. That is, the ubiquitous nurturing role extends not only to women's offspring, but to other relationships, as opposed to men, whose deep sense of self is not relational. Chodorow was joined by other authors who sought to define "gender identity" relations. The popularly acclaimed book by Carol Gilligan, *In Another Voice* (1984) is an example. Gender difference theories such as these attempt to accommodate the desire for sisterhood by acknowledging differences in class, race, sex, and ethnicity; however, these are seen as subsidiary to gender similarities. However, it is assigning these differences as secondary that has caused many women to deny any association with the feminist project. Nonetheless, Carol Gilligan struck a chord, particularly with white, middle class women, with her claims that the ways in which women are socialized colors their interpretations of their experiences of themselves and their world, and further, that these interpretations, which differ qualitatively from those shared by men, give women a privileged perspective.

Chantal Mouffe (1995) discusses the problematic posed in feminist approaches that argue for privileging the identity of women as mothers, and the family as superior to the public realm which is both patriarchal and exclusionary. She cites Carole Pateman (1986) as belonging to the group of feminists who argue against liberal individualist values in favor of an approach that celebrates women as women, including women as mothers, caregivers and nurturers. Pateman describes the full integration of women into patriarchal citizenship as the "Wollstonecraft dilemma", one in which women are expected to become like men while at the same time privileging the expression of their distinctive feminine attributes as valued

contributions to citizenship. This duality, according to Pateman, cannot be sustained since the latter is precisely what patriarchal citizenship excludes. Mouffe agrees with Pateman that citizenship, as it has been constructed in the public realm, and identified with men, is exclusionary and destructive for women, but disagrees that redefining sexually differentiated tasks as citizenship is preferable to reconceptualizing citizenship where difference is simply not pertinent.

The notion that women have different ways of knowing, has peaked the imaginations of those who visualize new ways of organizing and interacting in the public sphere that take full advantage of women's unique perspective of social relations. Envisioned is a more humanistic approach, that is, more respectful of marginalized voices than the hierarchical bureaucratic structures to which we are accustomed. Nevertheless, the assertion by "difference" theorists that women are inherently different from men as been roundly criticized from several feminist perspectives as essentialist.

While sharing the Marxists' basic conceptions of the transformative characteristics of human nature, socialist feminists go beyond the economic interests of class and mechanisms of production to embrace noneconomic issues of gender relations. Thus, included with the abolition of class is the abolition of gender, that is, the segregation of women into roles and responsibilities associated with the domestic sphere. Various socialist feminist manifestos speak of shared responsibilities for child-rearing and nurturing, challenging the sexual division of labor, breaking down the distinctions between mental and manual labor, involving men and women equally in the labor force, and ending classism and racism. However, recognizing the influence that social organization in Western culture has in limiting opportunities for substantive changes in the way we work and live beyond work, socialist feminists have acknowledged the tensions that exists for women between an ascribed ideal and lived reality setting the stage, as it were, for a frustration of purpose, on the one hand, and a search for a way in which all women can participate in theory-building.

The problem, according to Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson (1988) is not that alternative Theories of causality are inherently

wrong, but that their essentialist nature precludes their claims to the project of a grand social theory. The need to include all women: women of color, poor and working class women, Third World women, and lesbians militates against attempts to locate a metanarrative, or quasi-metanarratives. The multi-layered, multihued collage of interests and experiences that women represent suggests multiple approaches that might best be met in the practice of feminisms.

## Postmodern Feminisms

The postmodern feminists are, perhaps, the most difficult about whom to generalize, particularly since both terms, "postmodern" and "feminist," are disputed by some to whom both are applied, and conflicting views on what constitutes postmodern feminism can be found from a cursory examination of articles and books claiming the name. Compounding the problem, is that those in the vanguard of postmodern feminisms, feminist philosophers, employ a language that seems inaccessible to the uninitiated. Nonetheless, if there is an evolutionary aspect to feminist theory since the 1960s, then postmodern feminists represent the new wave in the US, including among their numbers drinkers with allegiances to Marxist, socialist and radical feminist epistemologies.

The question posed by Simone de Beauvoir, 'Why is woman the second sex?' forms the basis for the postmodern feminist question, "Why is woman the Other?" French feminists, who were among the first to articulate feminisms in a postmodern context, turned de Beauvoir's conceptions of Otherness around, so that while woman remains the Other, she is now in a position to criticize the social order that the patriarchal society imposes on all those who live on the margins. This, of course, includes women. Thus, while Otherness is associated with oppression, it is also a way of being, drinking, and speaking that has the potential for openness, plurality, diversity, and difference (Tong, 1989 p.219).

Postmodern feminism envisioned by many contemporary feminist theorists, particularly in the United States, has some qualifications. For example, the rejection of labels (for some this includes anything

that ends in "ism") is seen as difficult if not impossible, and certainly appears to subvert the need to locate women, along with other groups, as oppressed. As Judith Butler (1992) reasons, women must qualify as subject before representation can be extended, and since women/gender intersects race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, its presumed universality is undermined. There is no seamless category of women; yet, the need for a category "women" is necessary since lobbying in behalf of women is still a political imperative. Chantal Mouffe argues that the modern conception of citizenship is remedied "not by making sexual difference politically relevant to its definition, but by constructing a new conception of citizenship where sexual difference should become affectively nonpertinent" (1995, p. 323). Mouffe calls for a Reconstruction of essentialized identities. The question is then, how to conceptualize women as a group without succumbing to the essentialist problematic?

Fraser and Nicholson suggest a postmodern nonuniversalism that opens opportunities for a comparative feminism attuned to changes and contrasts rather than covering laws, that is pragmatic and fallibilistic, with methods and categories tailored to specific tasks at hand, and that forswears the single feminist method or feminist epistemology. They suggest a tapestry of many different threads and hues with practice made up of overlapping alliances, in other words, the practice of feminisms (1988, p. 100).

## **The Social Collectivity or Seriality**

Iris Marion Young offers a reconceptualization of the social collectivity, or a renaming of social groups, along the lines of Sartre's phenomenon of serial collectivity, described in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1976) as a viable response to the dilemma of naming categories. By adapting Sartre's conceptualization to feminist purposes, Young suggests that women may be seen as a collectivity without the need for identifying its members' common attributes or myriad differences. Counter to the liberal individualism which disdains such categorizations, woman as a collective social position is necessary if her exclusion, oppression and disadvantages are to be addressed. Eliminating categories, in this sense, results in blaming the

victim, or the attitudes of the victimizers and, in essence, leaves women to fend for themselves.

Feminists' attempts to theorize gender identity as multiple rather than binary, or argue that women constitute a group only in the politicized context of feminist struggle are laudable but, in Young's view, are nonetheless doomed strategies. The first requires stability and unity of categories resulting in potentially "infinite regress that dissolves groups into individuals" (Young, 1995 p. 195). The second, called coalition politics, (that is, bringing women together, whatever their identity relation, around a social or political purpose) necessarily privileges some norms and experiences over others. This makes feminist politics arbitrary, and runs the risk of leaving women out who do not identify themselves as feminists.

Central to the notion of seriality is the distinction made between serial membership and group membership. Membership in a serial is defined as anonymous, and the unity of the series is amorphous, without determinate limits, attributes, or intentions, e.g., one may be an accountant, an attorney, a laborer, or for that matter, a commuter on the Long Island Expressway. It isn't necessary to identify a set of common attributes—membership in a serial does not *define* one's identity. Groups, on the other hand, have a self-conscious reason for being; since they "arise from, and on the basis of the serialized existence, as a reaction to it and an active reversal of its anonymous and isolating conditions" (Young, 1995 p. 203).

The advantages of thinking of women as serial allows us to think about women as a social collective without the necessity for identifying common attributes or common situations, nor does it require that we proclaim an identity to participate in collective action. Gender as series is amorphous. Although the reminders of our seriality can be found everywhere in what Sartre called the "practico-inert" structures and objects that surround us, membership in the series does not define one's identity. For example, practico-inert objects for individuals in the gender series are our bodies, pronouns, verbal and visual representations, clothes, cosmetics, tools, furniture and spaces, offices, workstations, locker rooms, uniforms, language, gestures, and rituals of exclusion or inclusion, among others. An

obvious practico-inert structure for the gender serial is the sexual division of labor.

Young maintains that "the serialized experience of being gendered is precisely the obverse of mutual recognition and the positive identification of one's self as [a member of] a group. 'I am a woman' at this level is an anonymous fact that does not define me in my active individuality" (Young, 1998 p. 206). It is possible then to share identity with a group that arises on the basis of, and in response to, the condition of being a woman...that is, to a serialized condition.

This description, albeit brief, of a postmodern feminism has seemingly unlimited implications for the woman serial, the public administrator serial, and the bureaucrat serial, for it is certainly possible under this concept to be members of all of these and more. Kathy E. Ferguson, in *The Feminist Case Against Bureaucracy* argues "...that members of bureaucratic society are embedded within a political situation similar in many respects to that in which women traditionally find themselves, and are subject to a parallel set of forces and pressures through which subordination is created and maintained" (1984, p.83).

The serial woman is subordinate in relation to the practico-inert division of labor enforced by bureaucratic structures, as is the serial woman subordinate to the practico-inert texts of public administration discourses. Under Young's conception of seriality, the serial woman is inclusive of all, or any woman, whatever their views on feminism, grouping together to change or eliminate structures that serialize them as women.

## Conclusion

I began this paper by voicing my concern for the shortage of women writing in mainstream public administration journals on topics that could be considered to proclaim a feminist position. I contrasted the liberal feminist views based on Enlightenment notions of rationality, individualism, the sanctity of privacy with the resulting differentiation between the private and public spheres, and notions of bracketing, or setting aside differences, with other feminist approaches that critique these values. I also described briefly Young's adaptation of

Sartre's concept of seriality, proposing that, as Young suggests, it opens possibilities for the inclusion of women with very different viewpoints and preferences, as serial women, to coalesce around projects the focus on which may be one of the few common attributes they share. In my view, the field of public administration can profit from an open consideration, and thoughtful analysis of feminist perspectives, particularly the practice of postmodern feminisms. And, women in public administration have even more to gain with the potential inclusiveness that conceptualizing our position as serial women has to offer.

*"If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change."*

Simone de Beauvoir  
(Introduction xviii, *The Second Sex*)

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# Scenes from the Unconscious

*Rosemary L. Farmer*

In looking at organizations, the scene needs to shift, in part, to the unconscious. Some will find this to be strange. But for those of us who think that the unconscious is a piece of our psychic apparatus which is crucial to each of us as we participate in all of our interpersonal and social relationships, it is not at all difficult to imagine greater influence of the unconscious in our organizational memberships and interrelationships. The right hemisphere, which represents the non-linear and non-rational part of the brain, has been called the seat of the unconscious, while the left hemisphere represents language, the rational and the conscious. As McSwite (1996) so aptly points out, it is crucial that we use both parts of our brain in a coordinated fashion in order to respond to events in totality. That is, it is important in organizations if we wish to realize what Mary Parker Follett had in mind (as discussed later) by the Law of the Situation and by her rejection of the idea of management domination either by manipulation, by force of personality or by hierarchical authority.

Encouraging us to move away from the limits of a rigid adherence to the rational, and to utilize our entire brain, postmodernism can help in informing our understanding of organizations. Those of us who are interested in the practical challenge of administering programs should go beyond postmodernism by further developing practices that are consistent with what is helpful in the postmodern perspective but that do not sacrifice what has proven to be valuable in the modernist perspective. Modern-postmodern debating within some action disciplines, e.g. public or business administration, social work administration or health administration, needs to move beyond the first encounter with a new term or idea, viz. postmodernism, and become more thoughtful. Postmodernism should not be required to explain itself or to prove itself in modernist terms. Rather, a shift is

needed to the "in-between." In this situation the concept of the "in-between" is used to mean the relatively neutral conceptual space between the modern and the postmodern frameworks. The unconscious is a location common to the modern-postmodern divide, a site of the in-between.

The unconscious, by its nature, is a repressed—a suppressed—voice. Recall that postmodernism, in political and social terms, is especially concerned with de-marginalizing suppressed voices. Postmodern administration can be expected to work toward de-marginalizing the unconscious in at least three respects. First, the very notion of the unconscious in administration (the place and role of the unconscious in organizational functioning) should be better understood. Important work in highlighting the role of the unconscious in organizational thinking has been done (e.g., see Diamond, 1993), and the psychological constitutes important parts of administrative and organization theorizing. This position sees the unconscious as being more than peripheral in administrative thinking. The second way in which postmodern administration can de-marginalize the unconscious is to make acceptable the interpretations that grow out of the repressed unconscious. For example, interesting interpretations have been made regarding the applications of critical theory (e.g., see Denhardt, 1981). Thirdly, the mechanisms that are repressing the unconscious in the administrative setting should be brought into central focus; we need to work on dismantling them, since defenses that are used too rigidly or too often prove unhealthy to social (i.e. work) relationships. De-marginalizing the unconscious is a commonsense priority for the practical business of postmodern administration.

There are four questions that need to be addressed. First, what is the unconscious? I suggest that a prime characteristic is that it is uncanny; it is not an add-on to consciousness, an item easily understood in conscious terms. Second, why do we tend to trivialize it? There are the usual reasons (the usual suspects). On the psychological side, there is repression and resistance; on the administrative side, there is a preference for short-term practitioner pay-offs. I suggest that another reason is discomfort with the loss of conscious control and with the uncanny, the weird. Third, what

relevance does this understanding of the unconscious (and this understanding of the trivializing of the unconscious) have for the practical problems of administering? Fourth, do the modern and the postmodern frameworks provide different understandings of the workings of the unconscious? It will be argued that they do, based on the postmodern view which involves radical hesitation about theory, the claims of distinct disciplines, positivism, categorization, and ultimate reality.

### **Uncanny at Best: What is the Unconscious?**

While the concept of the unconscious was used prior to Freud, he developed it in a unique way. With the publication of "The Interpretation of Dreams" in 1900, Freud described his topographical model of the mind, which included the conscious system, the preconscious system, and the unconscious system. The unconscious system is characterized by primary process thinking, whose primary aim is wish fulfillment and instinctual discharge. It is guided by the pleasure principle and is considered illogical and child-like. The unconscious is comprised of repressed material which cannot enter consciousness without distortion. It includes the thoughts, feelings and desires that we are unaware of but which powerfully influence all of our behavior. Jung distinguished between the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. While the personal unconscious is reminiscent of Freud's, the collective unconscious is transpersonal. "The collective unconscious is the whole spiritual heritage of mankind's evolution born anew in the...structure of each individual" (Hall & Lindzey, 1967, p. 327). Lacan claims that those who came after Freud misunderstood him as saying that the unconscious is "merely the seat of the instincts." For Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a language; it is discourse. In his celebrated phrase, it is "the discourse of the Other." An important point is that the unconscious, for Lacan, is not interior. Because language and speech are intersubjective, so the unconscious is transpersonal.

An example of the uncanny nature of the unconscious can be seen by considering the nature of the Oedipus Complex and its central place in the Freudian system. For Freud, the Oedipal Complex is at

the root of all psychopathology. The Oedipal conflict is described by Freud as an unconscious set of loving and hostile desires. The pre-school-age child desires the parent of the opposite sex and wants the symbolic death of the same-sex parent. By definition, none of these feelings or yearnings is conscious to the child, though behavioral manifestations of this wish are evident to knowledgeable adults. Some adults find the Oedipal story to be weird, uncanny, and quite unbelievable. The successful resolution of the Oedipus usually occurs during the fifth or sixth year of the child's life and results in the child identifying with the parent of the same sex and developing a superego, which is seen as the heir to the Oedipus Complex. However, resolution does not always occur, and in such situations problems result.

There is a lesson here for organizations in the fact that Freud held that the Oedipal complex is the root of all psychopathology. If Freud is right, why does the Oedipal complex - uncanny and strange as the story is - not figure more prominently in psychological interpretations of organizations? One suspects that rational accounts have used the uncanny and strange features as grounds for overlooking (for marginalizing) a dynamic that should be considered central. The omission is, in the sense explained above, half-brained.

## **The Unconscious: Why do we trivialize it?**

One of the results of the uncanniness of the unconscious is that it is given short shrift and belittled, often due to fear of the unknown and anxiety associated with it. In addition, this core concept of psychoanalysis shares the same negativism and suspicion that Freud and the theory he developed always have suffered. Much of this is due to repression and resistance, but also is based on a lack of knowledge concerning the post-Freudian developments in psychoanalytic thinking.

Ego Psychology, Object Relations and Self Psychology are schools of thought which were born out of disappointment with the results of Freudian psychoanalysis to help certain types of people and problems, in an attempt to build a psychology of normal development, and in order to reject Freud's narrow instinctual focus.

While the unconscious continues to exist in these newer theories, there is generally accepted to be greater flexibility and hope in the human condition, and man is not doomed to suffer or destroy unless his impulses are tamed (as classical psychoanalytic theory espoused). Jungian and Lacanian psychologies have their own histories. Jacques Lacan considered that he was discovering the real Freud, for example.

Repression and resistance will always be in evidence. Repression, a defense mechanism used to ward off anxiety, keeps distressing thoughts from awareness, and can be a very useful mechanism for most people. Aggressive and sexual thoughts and impulses are examples of the kind of material that most of us would like to keep repressed, usually because they are too scary for us to face. By not attending to the negative stuff within each of us, we pretend to forget it (i.e. repress) and by so doing, trivialize the unconscious and its contents. In a later section we will see how some of this repressed material can be projected outward onto others we come across in organizations, and cause much havoc.

The other psychological suspect which is implicated in the trivializing of the unconscious is resistance. Again, there is the classical and the more recent understanding of this concept. For Freud, and the classical analyst, resistance is any action or attitude of the patient that impedes the progress of the therapeutic work. For this reason, it has usually been seen in very pejorative terms, as something that must be attacked and eliminated. More recently resistance is seen in more positive terms, as something which protects the person and must be understood. We also see resistance to change as being a universal phenomenon which is activated in any situation that threatens the status quo. In order for the unconscious to be taken seriously, resistance to change, and ambivalence about change, will need to be overcome at least to the extent that persons are better able to address thoughts and feelings that are frightening or aversive.

Another reason why the unconscious tends to be trivialized is related to the administrative ethos that tends to privilege the shortterm pay-off. The short-run is often misperceived as a matter of the tangible, the conscious. The unconscious is not seen as being results-oriented. Further, in the action disciplines, like public and

business administration, social work and health administration, the theory behind a certain technique or behavior, or intervention, is much less interesting than doing the intervention itself.

Undermining the autonomy of the human subject can also be a consequence of exploring the unconscious. Psychoanalysis and postmodernism, which are natural allies, both have important parallel insights about the limits of human rationality and autonomy. Some would characterize psychoanalysis as a postmodern phenomenon. "Psychoanalysis is a postmodern process, and Freud's psychology is its harbinger" (Barrett, 1993, p.222). The uncanny of the unconscious undermines the comfortable modernist ethos which privileges consciousness, rationality and human autonomy. Psychoanalysis, which speaks of an unconscious over which we have minimal control, is one of the forces which has tended to undermine the Cartesian subject, the autonomous reasoner who controls all of her own actions. Unless the unconscious is tamed, it represents forces that undermine the agency (the potency) of the subject.

Having one's power undermined is especially threatening for those with doubts about their own identity, and can be exacerbated in public agencies which are structured along patriarchal lines. In essence, the organization can be characterized as female and the director or president is a "male" symbol. Using the analogy of the domestic/familial relationship, employees would be cast in the role of children. Those in situations which undermine phallic confidence (e.g. males in the domestic situation that constitutes the civil service) may find this especially troubling.

## **The Unconscious and the Bottom Line**

What relevance does this understanding of the unconscious (and this understanding of the trivializing of the unconscious) have for the practical problems of administering? One option is the treatment or intervention alternative, which claims that pathological behavior in individuals and/or organizations can be alleviated. Certainly I see this in my own practice as I work with individual clients who come to me in turmoil, and via the psychotherapeutic process are helped to lead more fulfilling and less emotionally painful lives. Similarly, the

treatment option can be used to help organizations function in a more productive way.

Presumably, this is the view of those working on Organizational Development (O.D.). We would be concerned, in this instance, with helping organizations to perform their functions more productively. I would argue that this can occur only when the members of each organization or agency (i.e. administrators and staff/employees) are able to work together non-defensively in order to engage in mutual problem-solving. How can our understanding of the unconscious assist with this task? Ideally, each member of an organization would be totally mentally healthy and have no neurotic issues that might interfere with their relations with others. This is an unrealistic wish and not to be found, especially within organizations that function as work places. On the contrary, organizations tend to increase stress and anxiety by their very nature. Having a boss or leader, being told what to do, working with equals, working with subordinates, all enhance the power of unresolved infantile strivings. As a result, these unresolved issues get acted out within the work group.

In order to provide some examples of how unresolved issues get acted out within organizations, I will focus on two especially significant aspects of the unconscious: transference manifestations and defensive functioning. It is assumed that while the concept of transference was originally described and utilized within psychoanalysis, it occurs in all interpersonal situations. For example, it can explain why it is that we sometimes meet someone for the first time and have an instantaneous and strong positive attraction (or an equally powerful distaste) to her or him. Transference is an unconscious process whereby feelings and attitudes from earlier significant relationships are brought into current situations, but in a distorted and unrealistic. Because transference feelings usually originate with parental figures, they are easily aroused in the authority relations that dominate organizational behavior. Employees who consistently have difficulties with superiors, employees who idealize their supervisor to the extent that the supervisor can do no wrong, bosses who mistreat and belittle their subordinates are all examples of transference feelings (either unrealistically positive or negative) that get acted out and interfere with effective functioning in agencies.

Teaching people to change their management style, developing improved management information systems, providing employee seminars on stress and time management, et. al. will not help solve these more basic problems that are the result of early, unresolved developmental experiences of the organizational actors.

Defensive functioning is also an important unconscious aspect of everyday life, including that of organizations. According to psychoanalytic theory, defense mechanisms are one of the ego functions that help us to ward off instinctual anxiety. However, if used extensively, they serve to impair our interpersonal relationships and wreak havoc in the workplace. Diamond (1993) notes that the defensive actions most commonly found in organizations are repression, regression, projection, projective identification, and splitting.

Regression, which is used to avoid current anxieties by returning to an earlier period of development or level of functioning, can be seen in adults who become child-like in their behavior. We see this in organizations that are undergoing change, which tends to increase anxiety. Projection, which is the expulsion of a disavowed part of the self onto another person, can be especially pathological in organizations. For example, a program supervisor who cannot tolerate his/her own feelings of inadequacy, constantly may attack line workers for their lack of self confidence as evidenced in the work they are doing with clients. Because the line workers have a subordinate-superior relationship with their supervisor, they experience the attacks as unwarranted and inexplicable, but they feel unable to respond based on "reality." Splitting is an even more pernicious mechanism that can be experienced as mind-boggling and maddening. Splitting, known as the most primitive of the defenses against anxiety, is the tendency to see objects (i.e. persons) as all good or all bad with no in-between. This kind of rigid demarcation is grossly unrealistic and can position one subgroup of persons against another in the work situation. For example, under the extreme stress of organizational downsizing, administrators may become the ogres, while line staff are the "good guys."

The manifestations of transference and the defensive operations of the human psyche are just two of the ways in which the unconscious

can influence the interpersonal dynamics of organizations. Many writers speak about organizational therapy (see for example, Diamond [1993] and Kets de Vries & Miller [1984]). In addition, there is another alternative for how our understanding of the unconscious can help to inform the practical problems of administering - psychoanalytic interpretations that are understood in terms of truth approximations.

The truth-approximating alternative view does not understand interpretations in dichotomous terms as being either true or false. Rather, the new interpretations are seen as working toward, as pointing toward, the "truth" about a given situation. As postmodernists and others point out, our use of language, by its very nature, distorts what is being said and results (at best) in an approximation to the truth. Obviously, there are problems with the words "truth" and "interpretation," but perhaps social constructionism can assist us. The social constructionist perspective of human behavior makes use of stories, which are used to create meaning and purpose in life. In other words, the reality that counts is the reality as constructed by the participants. As the unconscious is released, stories and re-storying lead to the development of ever different interpretations. This process becomes a creative means of reaching new perspectives, new angles, on situations. Perhaps this process of storying and re-storying could be used by public administrators as they seek to create meaning and purpose out of the daily life of their organization:

This view of storying and re-storying sheds a different light on Mary Parker Follett's view of the Law of the Situation and on her notion of integration. Rather than management being a matter of directing subordinates, she would have manager and subordinate together be governed by the facts of the situation. Rather than having people compromise their wishes, she would have people integrate in the context of the situation. "Suppression, the bete noire of modern psychology, is, in the form of compromise, the evil of our present constitution of society, politically, industrially and internationally" (Follett, 1924, p. 164). There is a movement away from managerial dominance. But it is a movement that is realized, and accentuated by, the storying and re-storying.

The problem with the word "interpretation" is that it carries the connotation of being authoritative; it demands an answer to the question of whether it is right. So, I prefer the term "scenes" because it carries less baggage. What could be some scenes, relating to the long-term difficulties of laying bare the fundamental problems of administration, that might follow from the discussion so far? Two scenes come to mind.

Scene 1: Those who are involved in a hierarchical organization may be discouraged from taking actions—even public-spirited actions—that will displease the father figure. Or rather they will have a great need to go out of their way to seek approval of their supervisor. Various symptoms may be identified that suggest that this is more than a mere economic difficulty. For example, even full professors may be found who have the psychological need to be obsequious to their deans and presidents. Even public servants, when they have no "practical possibility" of being fired or even denied salary increases, find nefarious ways of seeking approval from their superiors. The action of the Oedipal may again be working at the unconscious level. The boss may symbolize the father, while the organization is symbolic for the mother. (This fits with descriptions of bureaucrats in such terms as the "second sex" [Ferguson, 1984]). In this eternal triangle, the public servant (or employee) may react as Hamlet did when he encountered Claudius, i.e. he feels guilty as he too secretly wants to kill the father in order to possess the mother. So he too hesitates, and his hesitation is in the form of seeking approval from the boss.

Scene 2: Organizations are basically dissatisfying to their participants due to the family dynamics that get replicated. Civil servants, as an example, work in a female environment, at least in the sense of being subordinate to the administrator. However, the agency is organized in typically male ways, with an emphasis on take-charge leadership in getting others to do what the leader wants. This dichotomous pull leads to great psychological anxiety, with the so-called leaders attempting to direct, coordinate, and control, yet realizing that this is impossible. Within the context of trying to manage the organization, the leader/boss knows that life in the organization is basically unsatisfactory, and the split that occurs leads to the vision of the bad

mother, who controls the sustenance of the organization. Just as in a family, there is a real split between the female way of doing things and the male way. In a healthy family the parental dyed works together to promote an atmosphere which allows for both female and male ways of knowing and doing. In an organization this would require that the agency staff and administrator join hands for the effective functioning of the agency (i.e. substitute family).

### **Modern and Postmodern Frameworks**

How should one interpret scenes from the unconscious? One possibility is a therapeutic approach that exists in the conceptual space that can be found between the modern and the postmodern frameworks. To explore this, let us consider the following five selected pairs of general characteristics of any postmodern "therapy" (pomotherapy, as I will call it) and the contrasting characteristics of a modernist therapy (modtherapy). A summary explanation is given for the respective postmodern positions.

Postmodernism's philosophical skepticism is consistent with radical hesitancy about knowledge—about knowing overarching theory (item #1 below), specialized knowledge (#2), empirical evidence (#3), categorization (#4), and reality (#5). Radical hesitancy about such knowledge claims is not a feature of theories within the modernist framework. Although modernists have been aggressive in suppressing voices considered wrong, the fact is that some tentativeness, as evidenced by the scientific ideal, is not inconsistent with modernism.

**Item #1:** Pomotherapies require radical hesitation about overarching theory. Modtherapies do not.

Summary Explanation: Pomotherapies have a preference, to the extent that they rely on theory, for micro-analysis and localized information. The framework opposes universalizing (or totalizing) analysis. Postmodernism contemplates the end of theory and the end of grand narratives.

As an example, let us look at psychoanalytic theory. The postmodern approach would deny that theoretical constructs like the Oedipus complex, viewed as having universal human applicability, are a matter

of Big T truths. But this does not exclude little t truths, perspectival claims relative to a way of life (or a language).

*Item #2.* Pomotherapies require radical hesitation about the prospects for knowledge claims of distinct disciplines. Modtherapies do not.

Summary Explanation: That is, Pomotherapies draw on the perspectives of disciplines which in modernity are distinct, e.g., the insights of sociology are among those which are merged with those of psychology, literature and biology. Postmodernism contemplates the collapse of disciplinary boundaries.

Correspondingly, a manager or an analyst wishing to take optimal advantage of the insights of disciplines X and Y (e.g., psychoanalysis and sociology) cannot expect that her work will be centered in X (e.g., psychoanalysis).

*Item #3:* Pomotherapies do not Limit the special epistemological claims of positivism. Modtherapies typically do.

Summary Explanation: That is, Pomotherapies focus mainly on constructing narratives, rather than discovering theoretical explanations (like transference) and applying them to particular cases. Such localized and context-dependent theory as exists becomes a matter of invention and construction, rather than discovery. The modernist hope of developing an accumulating body of knowledge, that gradually accretes an ever larger stock of empirically verified knowledge—with generalizations, laws, and explanatory theories—abandoned.

In the in-between, the positivist voice is not excluded; but it is a voice like other voices. It holds no special place.

*Item #4.* Pomotherapies do not rely on essentialist categories. Modtherapies often do, e.g. using the DSM diagnostic categories.

Summary Explanation: The modernist framework does not exclude essentialist descriptions, such as understanding mental illnesses as natural occurrences. The postmodern perspective would Reconstruct such categories, exposing the reliance on both latent metaphors and incomplete dichotomies.

The in-between would exclude essentialist categories. But it would not automatically prohibit categorization or diagnoses, as long as the categories are treated with radical hesitancy and tentativeness. The pitfalls should be in the forefront, however. The dangers of labelling are well known.

*Item #5:* Pomotherapies speak in terms that reflect philosophical skepticism about the human capacity to know reality as it really is, rather than reality from the perspective of a way of life (or language); and skepticism about achieving closure. Modtherapies frequently involve knowledge of reality and aim for closure, e.g. curing or coping.

*Summary Explanation:* Consider the discussion of schizophrenia in DSM-m and DSM-IV. Both refer to reality when discussing normality. Further, they contain a number of significant and unquestioned metaphysical assumptions. DSM-m contains an implicit notion of normality, recognized in such characterizations as of delusions that are “patently absurd, with no possible basis in fact.” Examples given (Harvey, 1987) include the DSM claim that one should have one’s own thoughts that stay within one’s head—reminiscent of Descartes’ cogito; the DSM places a burden on the person without schizophrenia to act in conformance with the Law of Noncontradiction (not easy for some functions, e.g., creative work, like poetry). Harvey points out that embracing Western metaphysics without awareness is not emancipatory (Harvey, 1987). Being confident of knowing reality, the modern framework tends to aim for closure, e.g., for human engineering to allow clients to adapt to reality. By contrast, postmodernism’s Reconstruction is seen as an unending process. Deconstruction, while yielding insights on the way, does not aim for a final interpretation.

This in-between requires a readiness to go beyond modernist closure. What this could mean is suggested by Jacques Lacan’s complaint that “it appears incontestable that the conception of psychoanalysis in the U.S. has inclined toward the adaptation of the individual to the social environment, toward the quest for behavior patterns, and towards all the objectification implied by the notion of human relations” (Lacan, 1977, p. 38). However, though Lacan discredits American Ego Psychology (he was ousted from the International

Psychoanalytic Association, which was dominated by the very un-French American analysts) some may still find the concept of adaptation to the social environment to be crucial for the functioning of any social group, including an organization.

### **Conclusion**

Administering and examining organizations needs to shift toward the unconscious, a conceptual space where we can develop practices consistent with what is helpful in the postmodern perspective but that do not sacrifice what has proven valuable in the modernist perspective. We should become clearer about the nature of the unconscious and why we tend to trivialize it. A prime characteristic of the unconscious is that it is uncanny; it is not simply an add-on to consciousness. We trivialize it for the usual reasons - repression and resistance. We also do so because there is discomfort with loss of conscious control and with the uncanny, the weird. The bottom line benefits in this shift toward the unconscious were illustrated by discussing transference manifestations and defensive functioning. It was also proposed that organizations can benefit from storying and re-storying, where psychoanalytic interpretations are understood in terms of truth approximations, an approach which sheds a different light on Mary Parker Follett's notions. Two examples have been given that understand organizational behavior in terms of the Oedipal scene. How the modernist and the postmodern frameworks provide different understandings of the workings of the unconscious were indicated in terms of radical hesitation about theory, the claims of distinct disciplines, positivism, categorization, and ultimate reality. This paper has suggested that administering should be more like therapeutic intervention than commanding, if the unconscious is to be accorded the respect it deserves.

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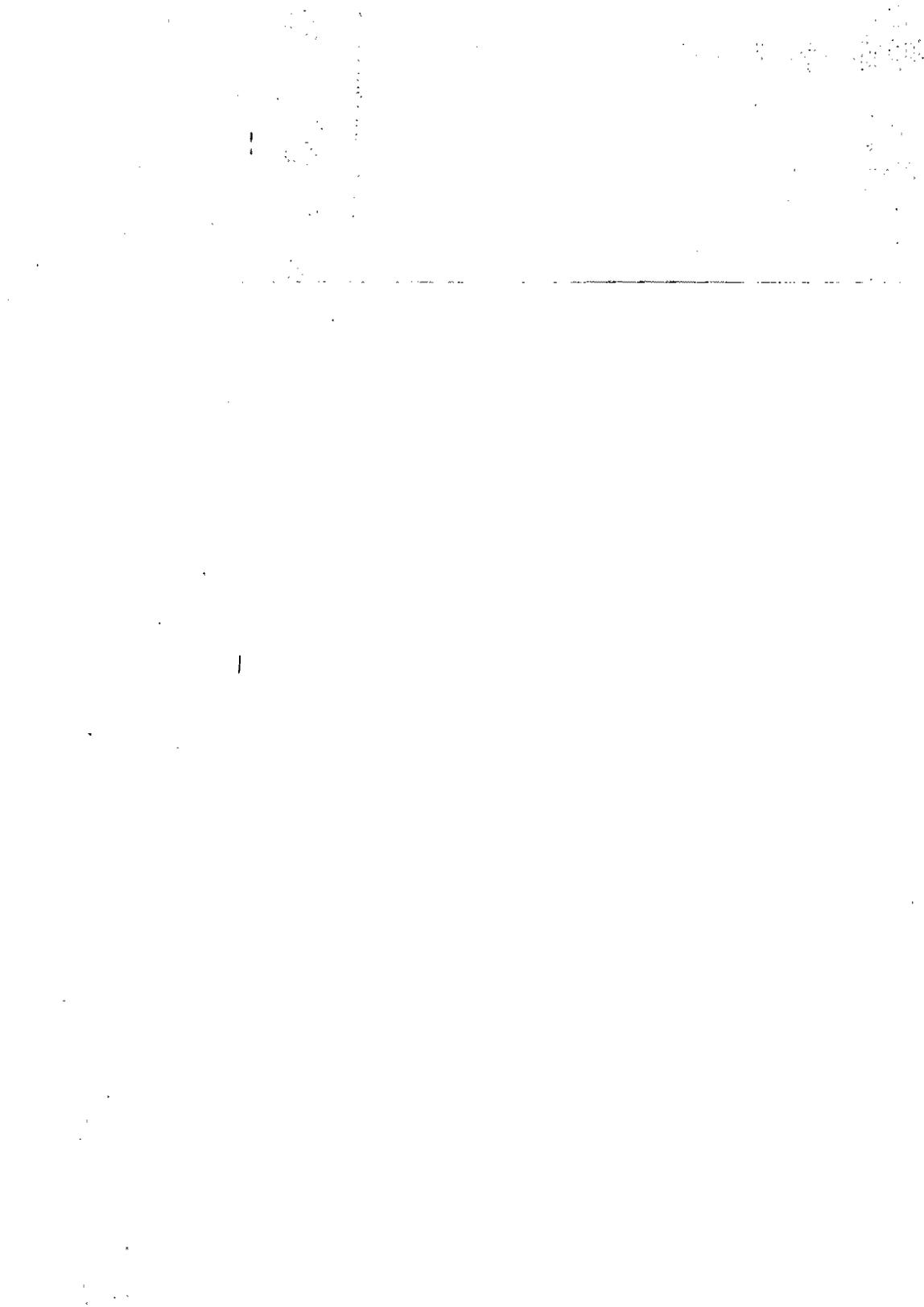
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# **Deciding The Undecidable A Few Things Post-Modernism Might Have to Offer Public Administration**

*Camilla Stivers*

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall...”

Robert Frost

For public administrators, hard pressed to deliver the goods to a world increasingly skeptical about government, post-modernism might seem little more than an irritating distraction. Longing for something solid to cling to in the never-ending process of trying to clarify complex situations and make decisions, practitioners are inclined to impatience with theory generally, when it seems too remote and inapplicable to the particulars of administrative life. How much more so, then, in the case of post-modernism, which seems not only to refuse to grant the clarity public administrators want, but threatens to leave them having to act—to decide—without a foundational leg to stand on.

Apparently bent on undermining structures of truth and value, if not blowing them up entirely, post-modernism seems from the practical point of view unpleasantly frivolous, if not fundamentally destructive. Yet when the clouds of deconstructive dust part for a moment, what may be glimpsed dimly is, paradoxically enough, a constructive process at work, one that supports the needs of practitioners by grounding itself in (differently understood) terms of human life.

One thing post-modernism has to offer public administration, it seems to me, is exposure of the connection between power and knowledge that lies at the heart of the modernist dream of rationalism. The project of modernism has been, once and for all, to know the world and find meaning. Those who follow the dictates of

reason will possess unarguable knowledge of the world: these few will find the truth, while the many are fated to labor in ignorance. By establishing a clear boundary between truth and error, modern reason ensures that within its boundaries unity will prevail; not only falsity, but ambiguity and ambivalence as well, must be relegated beyond the boundaries. Unity and boundaries deem the knowledge and common sense of ordinary people—that which is subjective, experiential, only half-conscious, fleeting, therefore untrustworthy—to be illegitimate. This judgment weds rationality to force, or knowledge to power: it sets up reason as law-giver, occupying the office of censor, adjudicating truth claims to secure order and harmony. Modern reason can therefore legitimate modern government, which has the same interests (Bauman, 1992).

Post-modernism, in exposing the link between power and knowledge, points up a risk that lies, often unnoticed, at the heart of the practitioner search for a clear basis on which to decide: that is, the risk of relegating citizens—the many—to the realm of ignorance and powerlessness. Recall for a moment, as reading Poirer (1995) has led me to recall, the neighbor in Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall," who "like an old-stone savage...moves in darkness"—that is, "He will not go behind his father's saying," which is: "Good fences make good neighbors." The neighbor, grounded in what T. Lacan calls "the name of the father" and public administration calls "the law," believes in the importance of clear boundaries. He persists in this belief even though, as the narrator observes, there is really no need for a wall here: "He is all pine and I am apple orchard. / My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines..." There is no practical need for a clear boundary in this place. By insisting on it, the neighbor forecloses the chance for a different configuration of community than the rule that "good fences make good neighbors." For him, boundaries create order and harmony. So does adhering to the rule his father gave him.

The narrator, however—who is honest enough to admit implication in this view of reality (s/he, after all, is the one who noticed that there was a gap in the wall and let the neighbor know) -worries about this insistence on boundaries: "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out / And to whom I was like to

give offense.” Owing up to what we might now style a post-modern impulse, s/he thinks of joking with the neighbor about whatever it is that has made the gap (“I could say, ‘Elves’ to him”). But the narrator’s better self prevails: “...it’s not elves exactly, and I’d rather / He said it for himself.” The narrator feels the extent to which boundaries are a power move that wall in and wall out, and in so doing give offense. How much better if the neighbor came to the realization on his own that “something there is that doesn’t love a wall.” The narrator refuses to legislate an interpretation of the situation, to correct the common sense rule-following of the neighbor. She can only hope that the two of them, through their shared labor, may freely come to the same understanding of the situation; s/he rejects trying to impose meaning. Awareness of contingency, then, evokes the project of community. Unlike the neighbor, however, whose community is based on tradition, the narrator joins what Bauman (1992) calls a “neo-tribe”—that is, a deliberately chosen, perhaps temporary community, based on purposes shared for the time being and continuous work. Ironically, then, in order to keep community going, s/he ends up perpetuating the project of rebuilding a wall s/he doesn’t see the need for.

Post-modernists view the boundaries on which rational knowledge depends in much the way Frost’s narrator views walls—as largely unnecessary, for one thing, and likely to hurt, for another. But there is more to it than that. For post-modernism, the project of wall-building—of establishing and maintaining a clear distinction between truth and error—is doomed to failure. “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall,” says the narrator. No matter how many times you build it, when you come back you will find gaps in the wall: not ones that can be explained, such as hunters make chasing after rabbits, but rather mysterious ones: “The gaps I mean, / No one has seen them made or heard them made...” Such gaps are part of the fabric of reality: all walls are fated to have them. Gaps constitute reality as much as walls do. This is what post-modernists mean when they talk about how the meaning of words depends on their relationship to other words, that is, to the context in which they appear. The meaning is in the relationship-between—in the gap—rather than in the elements considered singly. In this vein Lacan talks of language as an opening onto the other, therefore

always incomplete. Plenitude (words completely and finally "filled" with meaning) is impossible because of this opening, this relationship to other words and other interpretations. This is what Derrida is getting at with the idea of language as a continuous process of deferral. Meaning is not timeless or once-and-for-all, rather it constantly recedes in front of us, so that there is always a gap between us and it (Jameson 1972).

Paradoxically, though, like Frost's narrator who perpetuates wall-building even as s/he questions it, post-modernism can't escape the quest for ultimates any more than any other scheme of thought. Inveighing against terminologies and systems, post-modernism invents them all over again (Poirer 1995). The one difference is that post-modernism doesn't try to avoid its fate: it accepts the inevitability of its implication in wall-building, in systematizing its own lack of system (Bauman 1992). This self-awareness—that what we're all doing epistemologically is pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps and that there is no avoiding this—may lie behind the post-modern tendency toward what looks like frivolity. Like that of Shakespeare's fools, this is a frivolity that is rooted in fellow-feeling rather than in ridicule. 'make up,' it says, "it's time to get out there and rebuild that wall again"—that is, construct meaning—"even though as soon as we turn our backs a gap will mysteriously appear." In other words, we will build and rebuild our own foundations even as they wash away beneath our feet.

What help, then, does post-modernism appear to offer public administrators? First it hands them the power-knowledge nexus, an equivocal gift at best to those faced with the responsibility for exercising public authority. Next, it presents them with undecidability, which, from the point of view of practice, could look a lot like hopelessness. Some gifts! Yet perhaps they are gifts: if the quest for certainty is not only quixotic but oppressive, it may be that a better practice might emerge from such a realization. Bauman (1992) offers as an alternative exemplar the ancient Skeptics, who gave up the hope of certainty in favor of a practice based on reconciliation and humility. The Skeptics advised people to concentrate on how to live reasonably under the condition of irreparable uncertainty, using practical rather than dogmatic criteria.

Might this not be a reasonable framework within which to conduct the practice of public administration? In fact, might this not be what all of us owe one another, regardless of what our practices may be?

Derrida's essay on Reconstruction as justice observes that the uncomplicated, rote application of a rule to a situation is not justice. Justice is incalculable. It is "infinite because irreducible, irreducible because owed to the other, owed to the other, before any contract, because it has come, the other's coming as the singularity that is always other" (1992, p. 25). Just decisions arise in the gap that another person opens up for each of us: the other's otherness may be close to that "something" that doesn't love a wall. What makes a just decision is not the wall, but the gap in it: the "ghost" in every decision, as Derrida says, is the decision's fundamental undecidability, that is, its refusal to fall under a rule. It is when we think of justice as coterminous with law that the decision "cuts" (divides). Just decisions require a journey through undecidability: experiencing not merely the tension between two sides of the question, between apple trees and pine trees on either side of a wall, but the gap in the wall: that aspect of deciding that is foreign to calculation, to rules like "good fences make good neighbors." Just decisions are decisions we can live with, or rather, decisions by means of which we can "live with others in a space of expectation" exactly because they "refuse to surrender their vagueness" (Poirer 1995, pp. 274, 280).

Frost's poem ends with the rule. The neighbor, in all his darkness "not of woods only and the shade of trees," has the last word. Faced with this "old-stone savage" holding a stone in each hand, the narrator joins in perpetuating the divide between them, hoping that their collaboration may open up something new eventually. Yet if post-modernism has anything to tell public administration, it is that the otherness that each of us presents to each is where we may at last meet. The neighbor's darkness, then, may not be as tragic as Frost intimates. It may instead be the darkness of an opening. It may be, or come to be, paradoxically, that "something" that doesn't love a wall after all.

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# **Public Architecture As Social Anchor in the Postmodern Age**

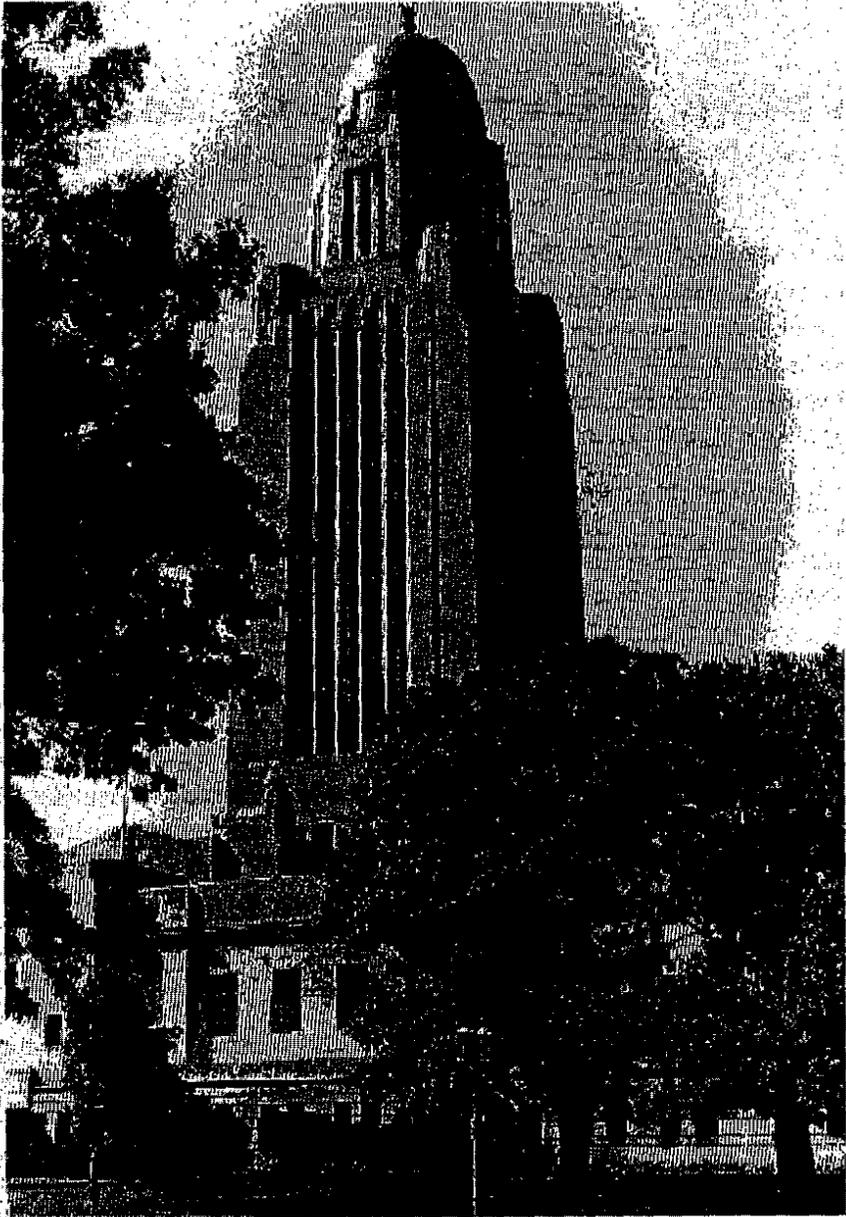
*Charles T. Goodsell*

In our listless postmodern age, with its privatized valuations, fleeting visual imagery, culture of self-pleasure, politics of self-gain, rejection of lawful authority, language of detached signifiers, and deteriorated level of common understanding, we should not overlook one potential source of shared meaning. This is public architecture.

I do not contend that public architecture is an ideal social anchor for the postmodern age. Its stabilizing, meaning-generating capacity probably falls far short of what we might wish. Yet, I contend, its contribution to providing a common social reference point in these fragmented, transient times is worth having and worth noting.

While not a follower of Lacanian psychology, I see this function of public architecture as somewhat analogous to Lacan's "point de capiton" notion (Leupin, 1991:69; Sarup, 1992: 53, 90, 108; Pettigrew and Raffoul, 1996:56). This term, which literally means the upholstery stud at the converging creases of a taut fabric, refers to junctures in our mind of what Lacan calls the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary. These psychological nodal points are "radical points in the Real" that serve to anchor the circular process whereby signifiers merely refer to other signifiers without arriving at a fixed signification. Architecture by no means provides a fixed signification to the signifiers in our subjective social discourse, but it does offer itself as a kind of "stud" that sticks up out of the texture of individual life experiences for all of us to regard in common.

**The message conveyed is that a different kind of institution is in our midst.**



**Nebraska State Capitol, East Facade, Oct. 1991**

Photograph by author.

## Aspects of Architecture

Let us begin by noting two obvious but elemental features of architecture. First, buildings are physical objects. This means that they embody a concrete, objective reality whose material nature is the same for all who experience them. This does not mean, of course, that the social reality of the building, which is constructed subjectively, individually, and differentially by those who experience it, is the same for all. That is an entirely different matter. Yet the visualizable, touchable physicality of a building provides a common reference point for the varied social realities that are constructed. This puts architecture in a stronger position as an anchoring referent for society than abstractions such as a founding myth or a social class or more discrete experiences such as linguistic statements or historical events. Buildings are capable of embodying powerful, condensed symbolic meaning while at the same time possessing tangible particularism (like language and history) and durable temporality (like myth and class).

A second important feature of architecture in this context is its physical scale. Designed for human shelter among other ends, buildings are quite obviously related to human size. As objects they are neither so gigantic they cannot be comprehended, nor so small they are easily overlooked. With respect to experiencing a building from its exterior, the object looks "big" and hence important and perhaps memorable. When we then enter this object we submit ourselves to its enclosure. As Hammer notes (1981), the significance of architectural space for human beings can hardly be exaggerated; entry into this space, with the sudden exposure to sensory stimuli and symbolic messages from all directions at one instant, may set off a profound registering of experience.

## A Symbol of Civic Commonality

What are the prospects of *public* architecture for serving as a social anchor, that is buildings built for and used by government? Let us review some of the latent social anchoring functions of public architecture, which are quite apart from the manifest function of sheltering the operations of government.

For one thing, the government building reminds all citizens that they belong to a comprehensive, organized polity. The fact that the same structure serves everyone reminds people that they hold their citizenship in common. There is only one city hall in town, one central post office, one main public library.

The civic commonality symbolized by government buildings does not mean that the populace is thereby persuaded to like the government. In fact, the presidential palace or ministry of justice of an authoritarian country can vividly remind citizens of the coercion and injustice associated with its rule. Commentators on architecture who are inherently suspicious of public authority, such as Lefebvre (1991) and Wigley (1993), contend that the design of government buildings is intentionally intimidating to the populace and constitute an "encryption" of legitimated state violence.

Without deciding for the moment whether such claims should be taken seriously, we can note that, at the very least, the public building's physical presence makes citizens aware, continuously and unmistakably, that the government is there. In authoritarian societies no one needs such a reminder. But in societies dominated by private property and the market system this may be no small feat. In a downtown filled with corporate office buildings, a suburb overcome by malls and housing developments, and a countryside that is fenced, gated, and guarded, it is useful to have some "people's property" too. The ungainly, old-fashioned, grimy, and yet landmark city hall on its public square, or the distinctive courthouse tower with its clock looming over the rural landscape, articulate the communal dimension of society in a physical environment that is built otherwise in behalf of self-gain, consumer utility, and personal privacy. The message conveyed is that a different kind of institution is in our midst.

## **A Metaphor of the Public Institution**

Another social function of architecture is to reinforce institutional identity. If an institution has its own building, and that building is distinctive, then those who belong to the institution possess a physical metaphor around which to ground their image of this social

entity. The institution is crystalized into physical form, so to speak. The police officer's professional life is expressed, in clear and succinct form, to that officer and to others, by the precinct station; the same is true for the fireman and the firehouse; the judge and the courthouse, the school teacher and the school house, the professor and the college campus.

Architecture can be inextricably intertwined with the institution's ongoing behavioral life as well. The controversial nature of supreme court opinions is not just a matter of intellectual debate, but of staged and televised protests before that court's Roman temple in Washington. In the legislative process, members of representative assemblies entertain notoriously diverse social constructions of reality, yet all meet in a single chamber that belongs to them alone. "The House" refers to a room as well as a body. The division of seating within that room creates the frame in which legislators categorize themselves. Ever since the French revolution seating in democratic assemblies has reflected ideology, filling our political discourse with references to left, right, and center.

## **Access to Space as a Political Act**

Still another way in which architecture may foster commonality in the postmodern world concerns access to public spaces. If, unlike private residences or corporate headquarters, the interior circulation and ceremonial spaces of government buildings are open to all rather than a selected few, an egalitarian notion of equal access is advanced. At the state and local level of government in America, public buildings generally are open to the public during standard business hours. Unfortunately this is no longer true for federal buildings because of shootings, bombings and other security threats.

Yet a tradition of permissible nonviolent protest outside government buildings remains, even at the federal level. Typically demonstrations are held in front of the building, making its facade the backdrop for a kind of democratic street theater. In this way the architectural elevation physically frames the exercise of First Amendment freedoms. Television coverage of demonstrations amplifies the impact of this public experience.

As mentioned, an argument often made in the literature on the social meaning of architecture is that public buildings are deliberately designed to be monumental and imposing, so as to humble passersby and intimidate the populace into submission.

While it is difficult to establish the motives of architects and governments, it certainly is true that many government buildings are both massive in size and fronted with steep steps, heavy fronts, and tall columns. In some instances, such as the Mall in Washington, the Empire State plaza in Albany, and the state Government Center in Indianapolis, lengthy visual corridors that terminate with big buildings emphasize the authority, legitimacy, and permanence of government.

These features may well put some citizens in awe, particularly upon the first visit. But the great public buildings that house the famous and are famous themselves are objects in this country not just of awe but popular affection. People stream into them to wander about, hear lectures, pick up brochures, take photographs, be photographed, and buy souvenirs of every description. The same can be said for the White House, Supreme Court, and executive mansion of many a state governor.

The fact that these buildings, in America at least, tend to be popular shrines rather than objects of generalized alienation suggests still another latent function. The structures seem to bring to the surface deeply felt emotions associated with the collective community. This may be part patriotism, part national or local pride, or part faith in the democratic system despite its many failings. Still another possibility is simply the thrill of being close to power and fame. Whatever the reason, public architecture seems capable of bringing people together in common celebration of a collective spirit. In effect the building is not just monumental, but a monument—a positive condensation symbol of considerable force.

## **A Marble Anchor in Time**

A final way in which public architecture can act as a social anchor relates to time. Buildings, because of their physical durability, are records of the past. Indeed, government buildings are often executed

in architectural styles that reflect the tastes of a bygone era. They are upholstery studs that have been around for a long time, in effect embodying the cultural textures of the past and affixing them to the fabric of the present.

In the case of Western architecture, the past that is embodied in marble and other durable materials is rooted in classical antiquity. This is intentionally so in America. Thomas Jefferson, together with certain other founding fathers, consciously determined to evoke the spirit of Republican Rome in creating the new American republic. A principal means of making this connection was to eschew for American public buildings the Georgian architecture identified with the English monarchy in favor of a classical architecture derived from ancient Rome. Thus classical architecture, with its derivation from the power of Rome and, before it, the democracy of Athens, evoked both the glory of empire and the spirit of the polls.

Also a futurist time orientation can be detected in public architecture. The durable materials typical to great public buildings constitute a commitment to the next century and perhaps beyond. Engineering lifetimes and load tolerances are calculated in excess of those found in a business or private structure. A widely expressed norm, sometimes observed in the breach by parsimonious legislatures, is to maintain the buildings well and to preserve their dignity for the sake of future generations. Emergence of the preservationist ethic in recent decades, with its emphasis on restoring violated spaces to their former splendor, reinforces this connecting of the past to the future.

Kunstler (1996:44) describes this temporal contribution of architecture—aimed both back and ahead—as providing “chronological connectivity” to the society. In his words, architecture “puts us in touch with the ages and with the eternities, suggesting that we are part of a larger and more significant organism.”

## **A Social Anchor In Summation**

Clearly, public architecture does not create coherence in the postmodern world. As a kind of upholstery stud, it gives points of

reference to our fragmented, transient, and disparate social fabric but does not really nail it down or even provide a fixed centerpoint for the orbiting of individually constructed worlds.

But, it is argued here, public architecture offers at least a stable source for the creation of some common, communal meaning. The sheer physicality of government buildings is present for all to behold and experience. By means of them the polity's collective presence is manifest, in a form that helps to distinguish public from private. Architecture crystalizes the institutional identities within government and symbolizes the importance of the great missions of government as well as the distinctive cultures of individual agencies. The openness or closedness of interior spaces comments on the accessibility of the governed to the governors. The use of exterior facades and public spaces for political demonstrations underscores the right of assembly and the power of television in a democratic society. The popular appeal of symbolically important buildings indicates that this democracy's public buildings do not overawe and intimidate alone but also bring to the surface feelings of personal investment in the collectivity. The dated style of traditional public architecture roots us in the past and concern for its preservation and restoration connect that past to the distant future.

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## Multiple Perspectives on

*Hugh T. Miller &*

<b>Interpretive Perspective</b>	<b>Detroit</b>	<b>Sex Predators</b>
<b>Representation</b>	Ghetos, violence indicate need for anti-crime approach	Sociopathic males use sex as arena for domination, rape, child abuse. Preman to prison to protect society
<b>Skepticism</b>	Racism and capital flight ravished areas, offer no help, blame victims	Touching does not exist in American culture. Sex is out of the question.
<b>Radical Absence</b>	Detroit has disappeared or moved to Pontiac. Auburn Hill, south, Pastureland remains.	Sex offenders behavior is an esteem version of normal behavior. Prison terms beyond sentence violates rights.
<b>Hyperreality</b>	Detroit is an Industrial Ruins theme park	Wild sex stories titillate and offend sensibilities. Gimme more.

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# Epiphenomenal Policy Topics

*Charles J. Fox*

Term Limits	Privatization	War on Drugs
Incumbency leads to corruption in government and fidelity only to special interests.	The private sector is more efficient. Government has become too large.	Drug abuse is destroying our cities and taking individuals to the bottom.
Freshman legislators are "bought & paid for" as thoroughly as others.	Government is efficient given complexity of problems. Private sector is corrupt.	It is irrational to outlaw marijuana while tobacco and alcohol are far deadlier.
"Term limits" masks the fact that terms are unlimited for entrenched corporate and bureaucratic power.	Privatization did not happen. Gov't intrusion increase via drug testing, incarceration rates, selling of confidential data.	There is no war on drugs, it masks a war on the "other."
Calling for term limits is fun and clever way to express anger at political system.	Capitalism beat socialism. Hip hop hooray! Go Bourgeois!	Cheap thrills abound 1) Get high, or 2) Lock up these bad guys, Miami Vice.

They are coauthors of *Postmodern Public Administration* and other publication.

# Call for Books to Review and Book Review Essays

Suggestions for books to review, particularly fictional works, and book review essays about fictional literature regarding organizational life and bureaucracies, are requested for future issues of *Public Voices*. Books being suggested for review should have complete citations, including title, author(s), publisher and date. A brief explanation of why the book is an important contribution and should be reviewed would be helpful. Books and book reviews selected should conform to the mission of *Public Voices* and the ASPA Section on Humanistic, Artistic and Reflective Expression, which include unorthodox and controversial perspectives on bureaucracy; explanations of how novels, short stories, poetry and other genre contribute to our understandings of society; and how society is reflected in the creative writings of novelists and others.

Please send your suggestions for books to review or completed book review essays to Willa M. Bruce, Book Review Editor, *Public Voices*, Department of Public Administration, University of Nebraska at Omaha, Annex 27, Omaha, NE 68182.

## **Critique, "Reality" and Resistance: Reflections of a Post-modern Agnostic**

*Lisa A. Zanetti*

*Postmodern Public Administration: Toward Discourse.* Charles J. Fox and Hugh T. Miller. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995, 175 pp., \$18.50 paper.

*The Language of Public Administration: Bureaucracy, Modernity, and Postmodernity.* David John Farmer. Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1995, 304 pp., \$24.95 paper.

*Postmodernism, "Reality," & Public Administration: A Discourse.* Hugh T. Miller and Charles J. Fox, editors. Burke, VA: Chatelaine Press, 1997, 210 pp. \$ 25.95 paper.

This collection of volumes challenges the field of public administration to consider the problematic presented by the postmodern argument. The volumes are productively read in tandem, particularly because the most recent, *Postmodernism, "Reality," & Public Administration* (1997), presents some arguments against the postmodern position and so gives the reader the opportunity to reflect more fully on the claims and questions posed by the various authors.

The first volume, Fox and Miller's *Postmodern Public Administration: Toward Discourse*, which I have reviewed elsewhere (Zanetti, 1996), offers a vision of postmodern public administration that recasts the public sphere as an energy field and points to discourse as the means for achieving a more substantively democratic polity. The authors contend that public administration is facing "paradigm anxiety" (p. 4), because so much of the practice of public administration is informed by modernist/orthodox approaches that cannot operate effectively—and are, in fact, meaningless—in a postmodern society.

Though this paradigm anxiety is causing confusion in the field, Fox and Miller suggest that it is also harboring a creative tension that can be used to overcome apparent obstacles. They seek to harness this creative force.

The book proceeds in two parts. The first offers a compelling critique of orthodoxy and its two most prominent alternatives, constitutionalism and communitarianism. Orthodox approaches rely on the procedurally-based “‘representative democratic accountability feedback loop’ model of democracy” (p. 4), which leads to the ethic of neutral competence. Because the loop is a myth, however, so is the need for bureaucratic neutrality. Constitutionalist and communitarian models have been offered as discretionist alternatives to orthodoxy, but these alternatives are not fully satisfactory. Fox and Miller conclude that constitutionalism is too conservative and communitarianism is too optimistic. Neither orthodoxy, constitutionalism, nor communitarianism are equipped adequately to address the conditions of postmodernism, characterized primarily as the “growing gap between words and deeds” (Chapter 3) that has stretched and agitated reality (“hyperreality”) and contributed to the “logoistic” politics of symbols without referents.

Instead, the authors offer a third alternative, discourse theory, in which reified institutions are transformed into energy fields composed of “malleable democratic discursive social formations” (p. xv). Drawing on the intellectual resources of phenomenology, constructivism, and structuration theory, and then combining these with the communicative theories of Habermas and Arendt’s concept of agonistic tension, Fox and Miller construct a discourse theory that allows a plurality of viewpoints. They abandon foundationalism, asking only that participants in the discourse be sincere, transcend (though not necessarily deny) their own agendas, participate willingly, and offer a substantive contribution, broadly defined. Because of the emphasis on discourse, as opposed to the customary monological tools of mainstream public administration, Fox and Miller contend that Their approach sustains interaction by declining to impose solutions.

Fox and Miller draw on a provocative combination of Intellectual resources and write in a manner that is conversational, engaging, and

easy to follow. They present clear, eminently readable summaries of complex traditions—phenomenology, constructivism, critical theory, agonistic democracy—and their critique of orthodoxy and its current alternatives are succinct and persuasive. As Fox (1996) notes, *Postmodern Public Administration* nicely complements the second book reviewed here, David John Farmer's *The Language of Public Administration: Bureaucracy, Modernity, and Postmodernity* (1995).

Reading a book by David John Farmer is a humbling and tremendously rewarding experience. The range of his knowledge and references is vast, and his arguments rich, careful, and illuminating. In this impressive project, Farmer sets out to analyze the language of modern public administration Theory—the canon of literature accepted by the discipline—through the method of reflexive interpretation, an approach that Farmer describes as looking at the constructs of bureaucracy and public administration through contrasting sets of eyeglasses (lenses) that represent modernity and postmodernity, respectively. He uses the iterations of a hermeneutic circle to probe the meanings below the surface of public administration theory. The initial vantage point, or hypothesis, of the exploration is that many critical features of modernist public administration theory lead to paradoxes or contradictions (p. 28). The hermeneutical process is used to examine, first, the assumptions of modernism and the “blind spots” that inhere, and second, to place the language of public administration in a postmodern context and show how the limitations of modernist language can be overcome.

It is not possible to give his argument proper treatment in the space of this essay, because it is too complex to be easily summarized. Instead, I will simply note some of the contours of his discussion, and urge others to delve into this rich argument for themselves. In the first segment, Farmer describes the general purpose of his study, which is to move beyond the socially-constructed boundaries of mainstream public administration theory using the reflexive language paradigm. In the second part, Farmer analyzes the primary tendencies of modernist thought—particularism (functionalist divisions or specialization), scientism, technologism, enterprise (which includes public choice approaches), and hermeneuticism, and

describes the dead ends these tendencies inevitably encounter. In the third section, the author examines public administration theory from the postmodern perspectives of imagination, Reconstruction, deterritorialization, and alterity. An example, of particular interest to me, is Farmer's discussion of the ethical implications of modernity and postmodernity. In Chapter 5, he presents the field of administrative ethics the modern impulse toward scientism and the effort to separate "facts" from "values." The paradox is that there can be no moral anchor for administrative ethics, only legal or procedural approaches. Despite exhortations in the literature for administrators to follow "core values," selection of these values remains somewhat arbitrary (though we might be loathe to admit it). Farmer contrasts this approach with the postmodern perspective in Chapter 13, his discussion of alterity, or the "moral other." When administration is freed from the tyranny of the efficiency motive, the question of what constitutes "moral" becomes more relevant for the administrator. Postmodern ethical attitudes can be characterized as "antiadministration," because the ethical impulse is to negate administrative-bureaucratic power. Some of the distinctive (and appealing) characteristics of this approach include an "openness to the other" (p. 231), which stems from the nonprivileging of positions and implies an antiauthoritarian stance; Reconstruction and decanonization of practices, which cease to privilege "expertise" and promote community participation; an acceptance of diversity; and a "moral imperative to be antiinstitutional" (p. 243)—that is, reacting against the unexamined standards of one's own institution and programs. It is a provocative notion—yet entirely appropriate, in this context—to consider that "foundationalist" modern public administration is actually amoral, and that the "nonfoundationalist" postmodern perspective is the one that suggests a moral stance.

Farmer does not present conclusions in the sense of declaring either the modern or the postmodern to be the "better" approach. Appropriately, he privileges neither. Instead, he offers four reflections that emerge from his study. First, he notes that modernist public administration has produced much that can be valued, and will produce much more. Still, it has encountered crippling dead ends that cannot be overcome within the modernist epistemological project. Second, these dead ends are further complicated by the

tendency of American public administration toward particularism; that is, toward categorization and being “confined by its adjectives” (p. 247). Third, he observes that the postmodern perspective offers both promise and instability. The implications are revolutionary, yet they are also without certainty. It is a journey, he suggests, that each must make for herself. Finally, he suggests that the dead ends of modernism can only be overcome by examining them through the postmodern lens—a difficult and challenging undertaking. As Farmer notes, “The postmodern perspective has little appeal for the impatient thinker, for the dichotomous thinker, or for the thinker who favors *Cliffs Notes* (p. 247). Nicely said.

The final book reviewed here, *Postmodernism, “Reality” & Public Administration: A Discourse*, is a collection of essays and responses from prominent public administration theorists, edited by Hugh T. Miller and Charles J. Fox. The collection was originally published as a symposium in the journal *Administrative Theory and Praxis* (Volume 18, number 1, 1996). The authors—Adrian Carr, Ralph Hummel, Charles Goodsell, Charles J. Fox and Hugh T. Miller, O.C. McSwite, Gary Marshall, and David John Farmer—presented original essays on the question “What is Real?”, which are included as Round One of the discourse. In Round Two, the authors respond to one another, and in Round Three, present rebuttals and final thoughts.

The contributions run the range from criticism and deep skepticism of postmodern arguments to “unabashed championing” (Fox and Miller, 1996: 41) of the postmodern stance. Carr, for example, takes issue with the postmodernist themes of “it’s all in the text; the death-of-the-subject; and the end of ideology” (Carr, 1997, p. 18), and maintains that organization analysis and praxis must presume some knowledge anchored in reality. Similarly, Hummel characterizes postmodernism as “pure silliness,” and argues that public administration in a postmodern context becomes the “management of paradox” (Hummel, 1997, p. 38). For Goodsell, reality is passion, for when we are passionate about something all doubt and reflection disappears. While he finds much to commend in the impulses of postmodernism that reveal and contribute to the demolition of a false order, he takes issue with the refusal of postmodernists to seek

something else to fill the “moral and ideational vacuum” (Goodsell, 1997, p. 42).

Charles Fox and Hugh Miller distinguish the real from the hyper-real in terms of the difference between genuine and disingenuous discourse, along the lines of their argument in *Postmodern Public Administration* (1995). O.C. McSwite suggests that disagreement over the nature of the Real stems from the inability of those in the field to agree on what the common identity, or enterprise, should be. This leads to a conflict between those who insist on some “Authoritative Real” and those who accept the “Tentative Real” (McSwite, 1997, p. 71). For McSwite, the enterprise of public administration should be about building human relationships that protect against Hitters even while recognizing that there can never be any guarantees. Gary Marshall nicely Reconstructs Simon’s classic *Administrative Behavior* to show the extent to which public administration is caught up in the Cartesian, scientific view of the world. Finally, David John Farmer draws on his work *The Language of Public Administration* (1995) to make the case for anti-administration that negates administrative–bureaucratic power.

I suppose I consider myself a postmodern agnostic. I found all the readings to be instructive, provocative, and well worth the time of any student or theorist of public administration. Given my own background and orientation in critical theory, I find much about postmodernism to commend it. Suspicion of absolute truths that degenerate into authoritarianism, Reconstruction of privileged positions, giving voice to the marginalized and powerless, and analysis of text and context are, I believe, important and valuable contributions, many of which owe their intellectual underpinnings to the work of the early critical theorists. But I am finishing this review essay on the heels of the most recent Public Administration Theory Network conference at which I moderated a panel entitled “Radical Public Administration,” and I confess that I feel less *radical* than *quaint*, for I must insist on keeping at least one foot firmly grounded in a modernist impulse.

That impulse would be the ethical imperative that I believe is provided by critical theory’s deepest roots in Marxism, and which is missing from the discussions of postmodernism presented in these

readings. Defenders of postmodernism insist that their positions are not necessarily tied to nihilism. But to me the comparisons to Horkheimer and Adorno, and the pessimism and despair into which the “melancholy science” eventually found itself spiraling as it moved further away from the emancipatory vision of Marxism, are inevitable and compelling.

Missing from these interchanges, I thought, was a sufficient discussion and acknowledgement of the differing “strands” of postmodernism. Kincheloe and McLaren, in the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (1994), note the distinction between ludic postmodernism, which stems from the work of Lyotard, Derrida, and Baudrillard, and oppositional, resistance, and critical postmodernism, which extends the critique of ludic postmodernism to include a social and historical component. The defenders of postmodernism in this series of publications focus on the ludic strand, emphasizing the Reconstruction of metanarratives, the interrelationships between language and the things or concepts it represents, and the mutability of meaning. In some respects, it is ironic that the interchange was originally published in the journal *Administrative Theory and Praxis* because these ludic postmoderns generally de-emphasize praxis altogether in favor of textual analysis.

The danger of ludic postmodernism, in my view and the views of others, is the tendency to reinscribe the status quo. Postmodernism contains simultaneously progressive and reactionary elements, a “strange convergence” in which criticism coexists with status quo social and institutional relations (Kincheloe and McLaren, 1994). Privileging no position has the perverse effect of relinquishing the discourse to the position that is already the strongest, despite the good intentions of making space for the marginalized to speak. The focus on language and context, the acceptance of multiple localized narratives, renders normative judgments meaningless. Without a normative foundation, there can be no impetus to change. Critique becomes disembodied, an end in itself.

I am particularly troubled along these lines by McSwite’s suggestion that we move toward a “pragmatic public administration” (McSwite, 1997, pp. 83-4). I disagree with the suggestion that the tradition of American pragmatism (or neo-pragmatism, since they draw on

Rorty) necessarily provides space for a more open, diverse, and people-oriented kind of public administration. Pragmatism was originally intended to provide a means by which philosophy could participate in the world of action. But proponents must be careful not to underestimate the attachment of pragmatism to the status quo. Pragmatism, in its original formulation, was also inherently utilitarian. Peirce observed that pragmatism was less about solving problems than in showing that supposed problems were not problems after all (Peirce, in Diggins, 1994). The reformist impulses of men like Dewey came less from the philosophical impulse of pragmatism than from the fact that they were fundamentally decent individuals (Bronner, 1994).

The appeal of critical postmodernism over its ludic relations, to me, is the retention of the overt ethical impulses of the Marxist tradition in combination with the deconstructionist contributions of postmodernism. Difference is not only the result of the logic of language, it is also the effect of social (particularly class) conflict (Ebert, 1991). The greater possibilities for praxis in critical postmodernism are found in the modernist impulses toward egalitarianism that critical theory supplies. I also take issue with Fox and Miller's argument that their discourse theory overcomes the reactionary tendencies they criticize in communitarianism. Presumably, their requirements for sincerity and so on sift undesirable elements out of the discourse. Still, just as communities have the potential to be both benign and authoritarian, discourse has the potential to be both positive and negative, constructive and destructive, inclusive and (depending on the rules and procedures) exclusive. There is growing recognition that Habermas' discourse theory, on which they draw, perpetuates the privileging of process over substantive outcome.

Finally, I would have liked to hear a more pronounced feminist perspective on postmodernism. I say "more pronounced" because I do not suggest that the works reviewed here are overtly hostile to feminist perspectives, or that feminist perspectives are fundamentally incompatible with any of the arguments presented here. Farmer (1995) in particular gives recognition to the contributions of feminist theorists, especially in his discussion of alterity. Still, a large and

compelling contribution of feminist literature has been to reconstruct the androcentric narrative, and I would have liked to see the implications of this contribution more explicitly examined in the context of administrative theory. Perhaps we can address this perspective in some future dialogue.

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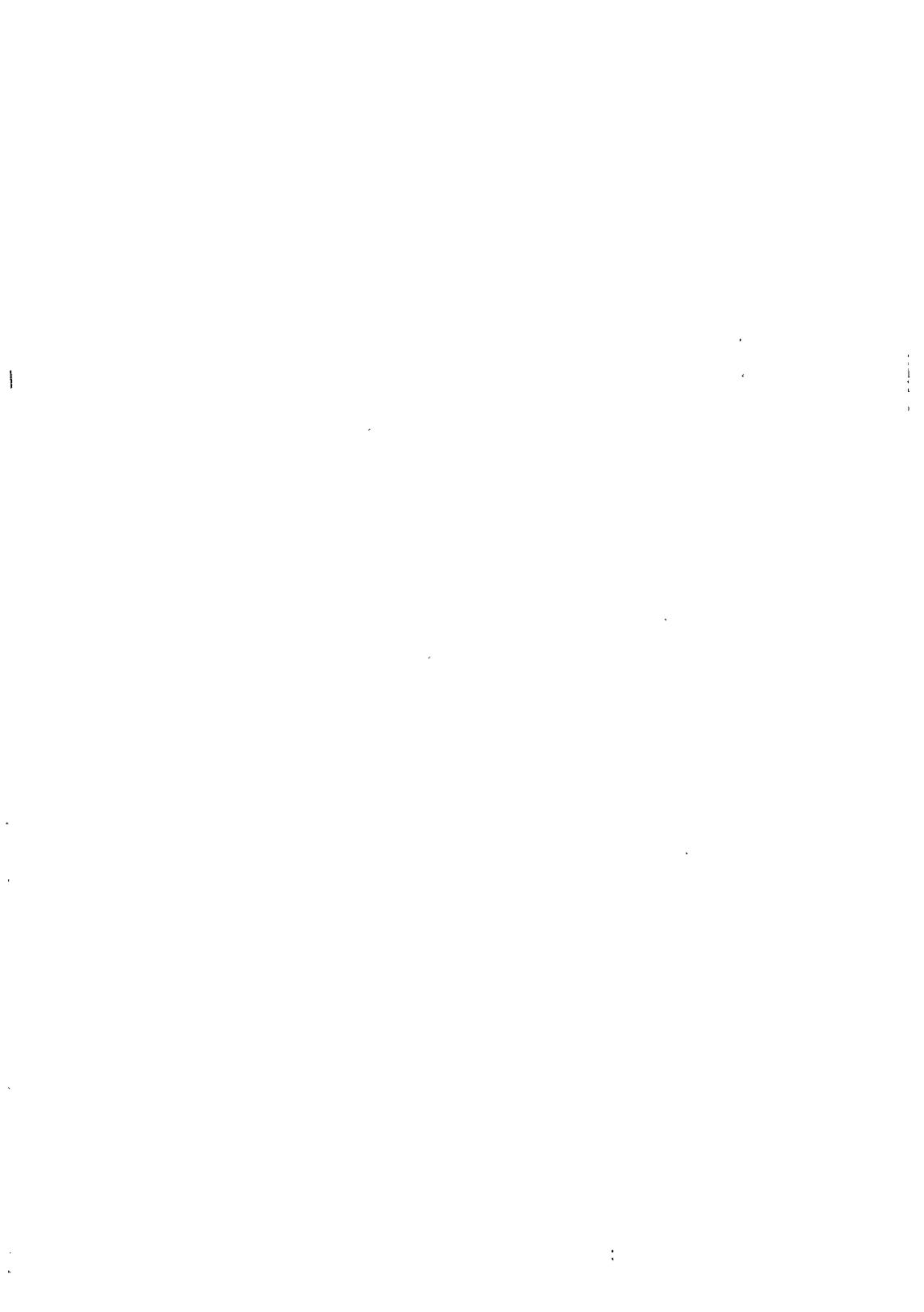
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## Answers to Puzzle

<sup>1</sup> RATIONALIZATION  
<sup>2</sup> HAPPINESS  
<sup>3</sup> PRODUCTION  
<sup>4</sup> EFFICIENCY  
 -  
<sup>5</sup> ALTERITY  
<sup>6</sup> DECONSTRUCTION  
<sup>7</sup> MULTI-CULTURAL  
<sup>8</sup> LIBERATION  
<sup>9</sup> APOLLONIAN  
<sup>10</sup> EXPERTISE  
<sup>11</sup> SKEPTICISM  
<sup>12</sup> DETERRITORIALIZATION  
<sup>13</sup> LEADER-CULTURE  
<sup>14</sup> ANARCHISM  
<sup>15</sup> ANTI-HIERARCHICAL  
<sup>16</sup> IMAGINIZATION  
<sup>17</sup> DIONYSIAN  
<sup>18</sup> WEBERIAN



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