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# Commanded to Enjoy: The Waning of Traditional Authority and its Implications for Public Administration

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**Abstract:** This article addresses the recent changes in social experience and the effect these changes have on the practice of public administration. It is argued that we have moved from a society of prohibition to a society of commanded enjoyment. This thesis is explored using the frame of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The central claim is that the waning of traditional authority means that enjoyment or *jouissance* operates on an axis of possibility or impossibility. In such a realm, the coterminous relationship of science and the market make most things possible.

As the call for papers of this symposium suggested, the question of authority in public administration has historically been a tacit one framed in terms of the public administration orthodoxy. Further, it has in one form or another referred back to public administration's legitimacy in the governance process. More recently however, this tacit assumption has received more scrutiny. Important symposia in *Administrative Theory & Praxis* are emblematic of such analysis. Here I am referring to the June 2003 symposium coordinated by David Farmer entitled "The Great Refusal" and the December 2001 symposium also coordinated by Farmer entitled "Mapping Anti-Administration." As far back as 1991, symbols of traditional authority in public administration, such as the concept of the public interest were being called into question in a particular way (Marshall & White, 1990). What was being called into question was not the particular legitimacy of such authority as one might have seen in debates of the late 1950s and early 1960s (Schubert, 1960; Sorauf, 1962). Rather, it was the status of authority itself based on changes in social life. This essay builds on the argument made by McSwite (2002). We are now seven years into the 21st century and in the past twenty-five years we have experienced "cultural discontinuities so palpable that their effects on the normative order regulating social life can be seen even *without* the typical necessary historical distance" (p. 4).

At the level of everyday life, the change in social experience is exemplified by different work patterns and organizational structures. A sea change that began in the mid 1980s *hollowed out* administrative agencies as the use of private contractors and civil society organizations to deliver public good and services dramatically shifted our understanding of public administration. An accepted phrase for describing this change is the *shift from government to governance*. Under the governance model of public administration it is axiomatic that the public administrator is no longer the one with the power to dictate the terms of the administrative arrangements. Rather, the administrator is one among many in a network of stakeholders (Bogason, 2002; Sorensen & Torfing, 2005).

The rationale for this sea change reflects the shift from an industrial economy to a post-industrial, knowledge-based economy. Whole-scale reorganization occurred in both the public and private sectors. Business process re-engineering and new public management offered radically decentralized models of organization which emphasized outsourcing and privatization. The employer-employee contract changed

dramatically also, the result being that most in the workplace now expect to change jobs many times during the course of their working life. In addition, because people now work in service-related industries and are less likely to be engaged in the fabrication of tangible products, the relationship to the work they do is dramatically attenuated. Who they *are* cannot be simply ascribed to their work identity. The result is that their own sense of identity is less certain and more fractured. Again, because the social institutions that in the past made strong work identification possible, for example, large government agencies and private sector organizations, have changed, new understandings about authority have begun to surface. Society, culture and identity become important sources for creating these new understandings. The focus of this article is the concept of identity and the way in which identity formation both affects and is affected by patterns of authority in society.

### **A Lacanian Perspective on the Issue**

What insights are possible about the waning of traditional authority? Further, what kind of social relations will supplant it? One approach to understanding these questions is through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The work of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan is unique because it provides insight not only for understanding the psychological problems of individuals but because it provides an understanding of social relations that is useful in understanding the changing nature of authority in society. Lacan argued that at the societal level, there is always a tension between the human order and the social order that is trying to program it.

#### *A Brief Biography*

Lacan was born on April 13, 1901, in Paris, France. He studied medicine and specialized in psychiatry, completing his specialization in 1926. He also completed a Ph.D. in psychiatry in 1932. His interest in other intellectual currents at the time—specifically the intersection between the psychoanalytic and surrealists movements—led to friendships with Breton and Dalí. Lacan, along with others such as George Bataille, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Raymond Aron were greatly influenced by Hegel's work as a result of attending seminars held by Alexandre Kojève in the mid 1930s in Paris. (The structural elements of Lacan's "discourse of the master" are traceable to this study of Hegel.)

In the mid 1950s, Lacan's association with Claude Lévi-Strauss led to an important turn in his work. Lacan's contention that human subjectivity is simultaneously created as a result of, and forever alienated by, language, stems from his understanding of signification. His perspective on language is grounded in the literature of Saussure, Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss. It is predicated upon a definition of language as something more than a mere one-to-one correlation between word and object. Rather, language is a system of signs wherein meaning emerges from the differences between elements of this system.

Lacan became known to a wider audience in the United States when he took part in a 1966 conference at Johns Hopkins University entitled "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man." A subsequent series of presentations at Columbia, Yale and MIT in 1975 were also important in the dissemination of his ideas in the U.S. His best-known work, *Écrits*, was first published in English in 1977, by Alan Sheridan. A new translation was published in 2002 by Bruce Fink of Duquesne University. Lacan's seminars, which were based on his clinical work, have had longstanding theoretical implications for the practice of psychoanalysis. His rereading of Freud's work using the framework of language and discourse has reinvigorated the field of psychoanalysis. His approach to psychoanalysis is taught internationally, foremost under the auspices of the *Ecole de la Cause Freudienne*. He died in 1981.

## *The Role of Discourse*

How is Lacan's work relevant to the question at hand? Lacanian theory shows how each of us is implicated in language. Much more than a tool, which we consciously use to communicate, language creates our social experience. The core idea that infuses Lacan's view is that, at bottom, discourse is the *necessary structure* that is embedded in the basic relationships that all of us have: intrapersonally (within ourselves), interpersonally (with others), and with the world at large. In this sense *discourse* governs every claim we make and every action we take. He famously states: "What dominates [society] is the practice of language" (1987, p. 126). For Lacan, discourse has the effect of mobilizing, ordering, repressing and producing human experience. This is in contrast to most frameworks of social theory, which suggest that each of us is born into a material world where we think rationally in order to survive.

Lacan's emphasis on discourse is quite radical. It assumes that biology is secondary to discourse in our understanding of human existence and in our capacity to construct knowledge about how to live in the world. However, perhaps the time is right for the Lacanian perspective. Our lives seem more and more to be dominated by image and abstraction. One result as we try to cope with the so-called postmodern experience is that our attachment, especially in the social sciences, to empiricism-proving the brute facts of the world-has diminished dramatically. It is not that the material world is denied, but we realize that such a view is nonetheless mediated by the process of signification.

### **A Brief Example**

Earlier, I broadly outlined the changed conditions of our social life and the changed structures of public administration. But what about direct personal experience? Social workers report that the so-called new symptoms of today do not involve a social bond-the Other-, viz. the bulimic, the anorexic, the cutter, the drug and alcohol user, or the person who cannot leave his computer. The way in which these symptoms are experienced has an almost autistic quality to it. We see something analogous in civic life. People are less likely to be political, less likely to challenge the traditional authority structures of society, much less transgress them. Instead, we enjoy our obedience to enjoyment-a different form of transgression. While this transgression is often manifested as the freedom to choose a particular article or mode of consumption, it is not a vacuous enactment but rather quite an authentic form of action. McSwite recounts the following:

I had the experience of being brought up short on this count once while presenting a guest lecture to an open audience at a large university. I was contending that postmodernist life was superficial and vacuous, a melange of empty sliding surface in which young people were being induced to regard identity as an ability to *vogue* or pose. Suddenly a young woman in the back of the hall shot up her arm and asked: "What is wrong with that? You are talking about my life. It's fine with me if it's superficial, evacuated, and gratification oriented." (2002, p. 11)

### **From Prohibition to Enjoyment?**

What follows is a theoretical discussion to develop the above example. Namely, the waning of traditional authority signals a move from an ethics based on guilt and repression to an ever-present command to enjoy.

#### *Prohibition*

The hallmark of traditional society is acceptance of *the law*, the most universal dimension of which is the incest taboo. It is predicated on the myth of the primal father outlined by Freud in his classic *Totem and Taboo* (1955). In that book Freud develops Darwin's theory of the primal horde in conjunction with Freud's own discussion of totemism. In doing so, Freud gives a universal account of the social order within human groups and the pattern of authority that structures it. Briefly, the primal father is the first father who can have everything. He is the all-consuming father who acts with impunity, acts brutally, demands total subservience from all, and is capable of castrating others. A summation of Freud's argument is worth citing here:

One day the brothers who had been driven out came together, killed and devoured their father and so made an end to the patriarchal horde. United, they had the courage to do and succeeded in doing what would have been impossible for them to do individually .... After they had gotten rid of him, had satisfied their hatred and had put into effect their wish to identify themselves with him, the affection which had all this time been pushed under was bound to make itself felt. ... A sense of guilt made its appearance, which in this instance coincided with the remorse felt by the whole group. The dead father became stronger than the living one had been-for events took the course we often see them follow in human affairs to this day. What had been prevented by his actual existence was thenceforward prohibited by the sons themselves, in accordance with the psychological procedure so familiar to us in psycho-analyses under the name of *deferred obedience*. They revoked their deed by forbidding the killing of the totem, the substitute for their father; and they renounced its fruits by resigning their claim to the women who had now been set free. (1955, pp. 141-143)

From the Lacanian perspective, no social order, no essential human nature exists prior to one's entering into a social organization. Human entrance into the world of symbols, language and culture stems from the patricide of the primal father and initiation of an incest prohibition.

Lacan's metaphor for this theory of paternal authority is the Name-of-the-Father. At its most elemental, it is the idea that unconditional jouissance-the never-ending love of the Mother-is prohibited by the intervention of the paternal *NO*. Within this context, the paternal order, what Lacan calls the *Name of the Father*, or more broadly societal prohibitions such as the law or public institutions that enforce societal rules, serve an important function beyond the mere activation of the social order (1990, 1992, 1993). They create within us a sense of longing, a desire for something to which we think we lost access. It is the *lack* that which one gives up as part of joining a social order/organization that causes desire-that which makes us live (alive). That which we fantasize as lacking-called the objet (petit) a-causes our subjectivity to emerge (the constitution of identity). This constituting force-desire- is what defines our need to make meaning. When we are reminded of that desire-that lost object-through a glance, a mannerism, a word, or anything that activates this longing, we have the possibility for transcendence. As Lacan depicts it-desire can never be satisfied. In that sense it is perfectly appropriate for the average person to have complaints-symptoms and the like. McGowan develops this point as follows:

Because subjects experience themselves as lacking, not fully enjoying themselves, they look to the other [society, parental expectations, etc.] for what they are missing, for the piece that would allow total enjoyment. It is the subjects' inability to enjoy completely-to have an experience of total enjoyment-that directs them to the Other, that creates a desire for what the social order seems to have hidden within its recesses. (2004, p. 17)

This depiction of the structure of social relations that binds people together, that is, the social bond, also functions as the mechanism for identity production at the individual level.

## Commanded to Enjoy?

The central point of the argument thus far is that the incest prohibition constitutes a sacrifice. One must *give up* something in order to enter society. Thus what creates society is some enforced prohibition with which all must comply. This enforced prohibition protects us from the unabated enjoyment or jouissance of the Other.<sup>1</sup> One is reminded of the central argument developed by Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents*, in which he suggests that the social order is a struggle between Eros and Thanatos. He writes:

The element of truth behind all this, which people are so ready to disavow, is that men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved and who at most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture him, to kill him. (1961, p. 111)

The question that we must now pose is: How does one address this question of jouissance in a social world where patterns of authority are localized and the experience of people in everyday life does not require the presence of an Other? Such a question does not levy a normative judgment about current social experience. Rather, it brings up the need to understand how new patterns of authority regulate identity. The answer, in any event, requires the development of two theoretical points. First, if the traditional paternal function is not operating on us, what is? Second, what does everyday life look like? What are some examples of life in a diffused authority structure? I want to offer two contradictory impulses.

### *Enjoy! Evaluate! Repeat!*

My thesis is that the waning of traditional authority presents a challenge for the identity production. The argument in part is predicated on the changed material conditions—the shift to a post-industrial knowledge economy which produces different forms of social relations. It is also predicated on evidence of new *symptoms*. People experience their relations with the world in serialized ways that lack a connection to the traditional symbolic dimensions of social life. As Svolos (2006, p. 5) notes:

Previously, psychic structure was organized around identification with *Ego* ideals—representations of the Father, Country, God, and so forth—and these *Ego* ideals also served the role of driving agents in society. With postmodernity, the key point of psychic structures is the role of the objet (petit) a—the cause of desire. People identify themselves on the basis of how they enjoy themselves, on the basis of what objects induce a state of desire in them.

The crux of the above argument is that the symbolic function, as manifest in *the law* and other authoritative representations of society that are hallmarks of the *society of prohibition*, no longer guarantee the social order. In other words, the totem of the Freudian myth described earlier is no longer recognizable. Has another totem replaced it? In other words, as stated earlier, if the traditional paternal function is not operating on us, what is?

An important line of argument that has been suggested by Žižek (1994) is that what has replaced the Freudian myth of the primal father is its obverse. Instead of a vanquished father whose legacy serves as a potent but distant symbol of authority, we have an ever-present father absent any symbolic distance. Verhaeghe summarizes the issue as follows:

In the reversed version, instead of the real primal father, it is the symbolic function which is destroyed, thereby setting loose what Žižek calls the primal father, a figure who is only on the lookout for his own *jouissance*. ... Hence, primal fathers are popping up everywhere, on the lookout for their own *jouissance* and attracting anxious sons who are hoping for protection. (2000, pp. 138-139)

At the societal level, this is understood as the *command to enjoy*. Briefly, I will offer two complementary psychoanalytic explanations for ever-present father. First, I want to elaborate on one dimension of my earlier analysis of the Freudian primal myth. As much as the sons vanquish the primal father, what remains is the agency of deferred obedience in the form of the super-ego. If we agree with Žižek's argument that what is operating now is the obverse of the primal father, then we have an ever-present command without the symbolic dimension through which to mediate it. In other words, the remnant of the power of the primal father lives on in the superego. As McGowan notes:

Whereas the Law provides all sorts of meaningful reasons to obey, the superego commands obedience for its own sake, and it is in this commandment that the residual enjoyment of the primal father makes itself felt .... Because the superego is a locus of both Law and enjoyment—two kinds of experience that seem at odds with one another—we have the ability to enjoy our obedience. (2004, p. 30)

What the author is referring to is our sense of *enjoying our obedience* and thinking that the pure enjoyment of such obedience is a kind of transgression. The society of commanded enjoyment is one of immediate and unrestrained enjoyment. At the societal level we see this in the pervasive demand for evaluation in every facet of social life, the auditable society (Power, 1999). Miller and Fox's trenchant analysis of this issue for public administration depicts both its absurdity and its interminable repetition (2006). At the level of the individual, it is the serialized use of objects. A slogan seen at a local shopping model communicates this point well: "You need it! You buy it! You forget it!" (Brousse, in Altman, 2007, p. 21).

The second point then relates to the idea that the psychic structure of postmodernity is based on a serialized identification with objects of *jouissance*. If the driving dynamic of social relations is an identification with objects of enjoyment, then what possibilities are there for individuation, that is, identity formation? This is fundamentally a structural question and can be answered through an analysis of Lacan's four discourses (2006). In Seminar XVII, Lacan proposes four basic sets of discourse produced in society (2006). The society of prohibition is emblematic of the discourse of the master. What is significant about that set of social relations is that for the individual, a certain kind of unique truth can be produced. In other words, successful identity formation will occur as a result of a *working through* of one's relationship to the paternal signifier, that is, traditional patterns of authority.

The society of commanded enjoyment takes as its point of departure, not the discourse of the master, but the discourse of the analyst. Such a dynamic presents a more complicated proposition because the basis for generating social relations is not a master, like a symbolic representation of the primal father. Rather it is the object cause of desire. In other words, what sets social relations in motion is a person's identification with the way in which he/she enjoys. The social order base has shifted. Events in social life are no longer either accepted or prohibited but simply either possible or impossible. The rise of advanced scientific discoveries and the prevalence of the market in all facets of social life literally make anything possible. The effect on our subjectivity is that we experience *jouissance* not as divided subjects (through repression) but as *speaking beings* (Lacan, 1999) who feel the effects of *jouissance* directly on the body.

As a result, the solutions we seek are to rid our body of the objects that affect us. The rise in gastric bypass surgeries or *stomach stapling* is but another related example.

I have developed this argument not to suggest a return to a repressive set of authoritarian relations, although this response is clearly evident in the rise of all stripes of fundamentalism. McSwite develops this quite well, pointing out that two predictable reactions have been to give over one's cause of desire to either science or religion (2003, pp. 189- 190). Instead, I want to advance the Lacanian idea of employing Name-of-the-Father (1990).

All this means in plain terms is that the question of how we form our identity as human beings has gone from a homogeneous metanarrative about authority to a more heterogeneous diffuse set of relationship patterns that constitute a different framework for identity formation. This means that social experience is likely to be found within micro-symbolic environments (McSwite, 1997b ). Laurent (2006) designates them as new communities of enjoyment. He suggests that these are communities that do not want to name themselves with the identity inherent in the traditional view of authority, but communities of individuals who want to invent their own name. A readily identifiable example is *seeker churches*, the role of which is not to affirm religious traditions but to help members with the practical issues of the day related to living, that is, producing and consuming (McSwite, 1996).

The challenge, then, for public administration is to work with this upcoming generation and transmit a discourse which allows the people to realize their identity in a manner that is grounded in their own particularity. The below example (Laurent, 2006) provides a way in which one might understand this as it relates to public administration.

#### *Tales of New Social Phenomena*

Two subjects forming a gay male couple get married in San Francisco. They are married using an administrative document original to the city of San Francisco. Neither the state of California nor the federal government of the United States legally recognize the document. This couple wants to have children, specifically biological children—they were insistent on this point. The couple *hire* two women: one is the egg donor, the other is the surrogate mother. The child is conceived through in-vitro fertilization. A contract is drawn up which stipulates that the egg donor can see the child after the child reaches the age of 16 years. The surrogate mother has open access to the child beginning at birth.

A new frontier is reached. Tradition is displaced and a new definition of maternity is defined through this legal clause. As Laurent (in Marshall, 2007, p. 16) notes, "Once you open this 'chain of mothers' you can, by contract, multiply [in the biblical sense of the term] in plural. Each mother [within this plurality] is defined by her contribution to the technology of reproduction."

Contrary to its Hegelian intent, the law of the Universal (the State) can produce and invent peculiarities in a way that opens up and preserves the specificity and invention of the subject.

Public administration, the administrators, and the public service entities of which they are agents are well inscribed in this discourse of identity and selfhood. Regarding identity, it is crucial for an administrator to become self-aware and to do so he/she must understand the complexities of human subjectivity. Regarding selfhood, public-service-related entities are part of the social order.

The above example shows how social life is changing and how traditional authority structures are shifting to diffused structures that emphasize particularity. In the end, however, identity is achieved not in isolation but precisely in a social context. That is, we live our life in cooperation with others and to that end we are severely constrained by the structure of those social relations. As the structure of authority (the



network of social relations) changes, we in public administration who are to a large degree responsible for society's effective functioning must respond accordingly. What seems relevant about current changes in the social order is that the social bond, however hidden, remains. What is at issue is responding to the current *command to enjoy* over and above the traditional notion of paternal authority.

#### **ENDNOTE**

1. The concept of enjoyment or *jouissance* is not necessarily a matter of pleasure. It is a type of enjoyment that may involve pain-a drive phenomenon, reworked always contains some dimension that is painful or destructive, viz. the *jouissance* of drug or alcohol intoxication which does not involve an Other, but carries a direct impact on a body which contains simultaneously pleasure and un-pleasure.

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