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The Blacksburg Manifesto and the Postmodern Debate: Public Administration in a Time Without a Name

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and

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Abstract: The question, "Does the message of the Blacksburg Manifesto fit the times that we are in now and the times that seem to be shaping up in the next decade or longer?" is addressed by epistemologically locating the Blacksburg Manifesto and by introducing the postmodern debate to the field of public administration. The well-known Blacksburg Manifesto is described as an example of high modernism, beyond the functionalist paradigm, because although the central commitment is to reason and progress, the classic forms of administrative rationality are surpassed. It is classified as high modernism because the agency perspective, as articulated in the Manifesto, calls for a dialogue that evokes reason through process in the tradition of Mary Parker Follett. The postmodern experience is described as connoting a world of immense complexity, hyperdiversity, and self-referentiality. Postmodernism requires assuming a posture toward the world that tolerates fundamental ambiguity and paradox. A postmodern perspective on the Blacksburg Manifesto is presented and the central paradox of the Manifesto is exposed.

In 1983, the faculty at Virginia Tech Center for Public Administration and Policy coauthored a paper that has come to be known as the Blacksburg Manifesto. The initial writers, Gary Wamsley, Charles Goodsell, John Rohr, Orion White, and Jim Wolf, came together to discuss the contemporary conditions facing public administration as a result of what had been happening to it during the Carter and Reagan administrations. The result of their dialogue was the Blacksburg Manifesto. The Manifesto addresses questions of the competency and legitimacy of American public administration, arguing that the legitimacy of public administration is grounded in the American Constitution and that it plays an essential, important, and positive role in the American system of governance.

A version of the Blacksburg Manifesto was published in Chandler's (1987) edited volume, *The Centennial History of the American Administrative State*. This version included an additional author, Camilla Stivers, who added an emphasis on the role of citizen participation in governance. Subsequently, Phil Kronenberg, a Virginia Tech faculty member who was on leave when the original document was written, also was added to the author group, and they each contributed a chapter to an edited book (currently in print) that was intended to elaborate the argument of the original essay. The Manifesto has become the focus of considerable discussion in the field. To focus and consolidate this discussion, Gary Wamsley and James Wolf organized a conference to discuss the expanded, book-length argument at the Mountain Lake Conference Center in the spring of 1989.

When the Manifesto was first presented, the conditions that were developing in American government and society that many considered troubling – namely, an overweening emphasis on market processes and a denigration of action through government-were addressed in a timely and sharp manner. The

unprecedented emphasis on the market as a way of setting social policy was seen as a way of supplanting what even the Democratic Carter administration regarded as an intrusive, ineffective, wasteful bureaucracy. The Manifesto called for appreciation of government bureaucracy and a reassertion of it into a vigorous role to help resolve the problematic social conditions that continue to afflict the American nation and that seem to be worsening steadily.

Does the message of the Manifesto fit the times we are in now, and the times that seem to be shaping up as the reality of the next decade and longer? This is the question we wish to explore here. Our theme is that the Manifesto reflects the consciousness of modernism, whereas the age we are now facing is postmodern. Postmodernism, because it is both a theory or mode of social analysis as well as a genre of social experience, provides a special opportunity for assessing the relevance of the argument the Manifesto makes.

Although postmodernism as a mode of analysis has been used extensively in other disciplines such as literary criticism and philosophy as well as art and architecture, it has not yet been introduced in the literature or the theorists' dialogue of public administration in the United States. We hope to introduce the postmodern mode of analysis in this article and, in so doing, at least generally indicate the sort of useful insight it can provide to the field. To provide the necessary backdrop for making this introduction, we first will paradigmatically locate the Manifesto to reveal its main implicit assumptions. Then we will describe postmodernism as a social experience and as a mode of social analysis, and then reflect the Manifesto against the analytic frame of postmodernism. In doing this, we have the space here to present only the barest sketch of the numerous conceptual territories that we must journey through in carrying out our analysis.

The Paradigmatic Location of the Blacksburg Manifesto

Viewed from the perspective of the intellectual traditions of the field of public administration, the Manifesto is the contemporary extension of the dialogue--central to the field from its inception--concerned with defining the proper role of administration in a democracy. As such, it fits within the frame set by the works of Waldo (1948, 1955), Redford (1958, 1969), Dimock (1945; Dimock & Dimock, 1952), Hyneman (1950)--to mention a few from the past and by Skowronek (1982) and others in a more contemporary vein. Hence the Manifesto addresses a theoretical issue that is vital to the field and that will no doubt remain open as long as the field exists.

Our immediate purpose is to describe the position of the Manifesto in terms that refer it to this traditional dialogue and that at the same time reveal its epistemological and ontological assumptions. This is what we mean by "paradigmatically locating" it.

The image that the Manifesto presents as the correct one for public administration depicts a constitutionally grounded agency, sensitive to regime values as expressed in Supreme Court decisions and in American sociopolitical traditions, that interacts with its environment (including the public) using a specific form of dialogue to create a community of meaning, a "common sense" in the high sense of the term, in which the public interest, as a guiding light to administrative action, can be found.

The Manifesto attributes to the agency a constitutionally legitimated, subordinate-but-independent status. This means that the agency must follow the directives of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches but that it can nonetheless protect itself from lethal compromises to its integrity as a legitimate part of the government. Its continuing deliberations with its public and political environment and its exercise of technical expertise and program experience accrete "policies" that reflect and are dependent for legitimation upon an underlying common understanding about the key issues within its purview and the

range of actions that is legitimate for addressing these issues. Central to the achievement of this common understanding is that a specific type of dialogue, a certain mode of conversation, is maintained in its relations with its environment and in its internal relations.

In taking this stance, the authors of the Manifesto are reacting to what they see as a more-than-somewhat-problematic condition in American society and its public administration. This condition, which has progressed rapidly since the Carter administration, is one in which the function of governance has been denigrated to an unprecedented extent. The activity of defining both social purposes and the means for achieving these have been relegated to the market to a drastic and inappropriate degree. As a consequence, the capacity of society to exercise conscious discretion in its affairs has diminished alarmingly at a time when the inexorable advent of new technologies poses substantive issues of morality and social purpose-the one after the other in continuing succession. On the social and political scene, superficiality has become substance-as perhaps is best illustrated by the Bush-Dukakis campaign for the presidency. As in this campaign, selling has become the primary model for social intercourse. What one is able to sell is, de facto, of value or the "good." Exchange value has reached if not a zenith, at least a penultimate position as a governing calculus by which personal, social, political, and governmental decisions are made.

At the very center of all this is the denigration of the public service itself. In his book, *The Case for Bureaucracy* (an important part of the inspiration of the Manifesto), Goodsell (1985) documented the inaccuracy and unfairness of the charges against public administrators and their institutions that fuel this denigration. At its core, the Manifesto is a reaction to these attacks, an attempt to build an appreciation for the many significant successes of American public administration and an attempt to reassert its role in the distinctive American mode of governance. To a certain extent, in doing this the Manifesto can be seen as helping to reassert the very principle of governance in America.

Philosophically and theoretically, the Manifesto is set upon a sophisticated, rather novel foundation, one that, it seems fair to say, could only recently have made sense in the context of American social science. That is, the Manifesto is not picturing the agency as the locus of a simple consensus building activity in the traditional sense. The viewpoint is much more complex than this and as such, reflects the contemporary reality of the problem of governance much more accurately than a traditional concept like consensus politics.

To see this point clearly we must distinguish between what has been called the functionalist and the interpretivist paradigms of social theory; it is within functionalism that such concepts as consensus make sense. The Manifesto, on the other hand, seems more to be grounded-if only implicitly nonetheless solidly-on the interpretivist paradigm.

The key difference between functionalism and interpretivism hinges on the role that it is possible for language to play in social process. The two paradigms represent rather completely different senses of what it is possible for language to accomplish in social relations. In the functionalist perspective, society is seen as being composed of ordered, regular, institutionalized processes that are normatively based. Society, in this view, is a set of values on which its members hold a consensus. Once these values are institutionalized, they in a sense propagate themselves (and hence continuously recreate society) through socialization processes whereby they are inculcated into new members. Hence members of society become role performers who are guided by the values they have been taught-a bit like social automatons. This is the basis for the famous and oft-repeated charge that functionalism is a sociology without people in it.

From this sketch, we can see that functionalism entails very definitely a specific theory of language. That is, in assuming that socialization processes can in standardized ways teach a common or uniform set of values, functionalists assume that language can function as a vehicle for transferring specific and definite meanings. Functionalism thereby relies on a theory of language that is sometimes referred to as legal positivism-i.e., that words can carry specific and more or less (or at least ultimately) discernable meanings.

It is specifically on this point that interpretivism differs paradigmatically from functionalism. Interpretivists hold that the enactment or construction of meaning through the use of language is inextricably involved with social process itself. Hence language is not the vehicle of social process as much as social process is the vehicle of language. That is, the interpretivists hold that any conversational exchange between social actors, if it is to be rendered sensible, must be “worked through” a rather elaborate, though almost always implicit, process of interpretation. Hence a statement never simply carries meaning. Even the simplest ones, such as greeting in the hallway at work, requires interpretive elaboration in order to be rendered meaningful.

The most radically different form of interpretivism, which, in our view, is ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984), sees every interaction, no matter how stable the social situation within which the encounter occurs, as fundamentally contingent, or “awesomely indexical” to use the appropriate ethnomethodological jargon. In this view, all the world is a stage where the players must improvise without relent. Hence administrative decisions are seen as enactments that accomplish the resolution of fundamental ambiguity. There can be no such thing as policy and policy guidance in the way these terms are meant in administrative argot.

It is more to the version of interpretivism that has been developed by Berger and his associates (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), though, that the authors of the Manifesto looked for its conceptual foundation even though they do not acknowledge this explicitly. The distinctive aspect of Berger’s framework, as it relates to the Manifesto’s argument, is that Berger sees the possibility for the ambiguity with which social relations are fraught to be overcome through a process of objectification or institutionalization. Drawing heavily from the theoretical frame of Gehlen (1956, 1988), Berger holds that socially enacted meanings can be constructed, that is to say, institutionalized, and thus become devices of influence or socialization. Hence, in this view, people create society, then society creates people though in a different way than the functionalists would say. That is, in Berger’s view, socialization is much less rationalistic than it is in the functionalist view. To Berger, socialization is accomplished through the movement of social actions or process from foreground (Lee, conscious awareness) into background (where awareness of their meaning is lost). (For example, whereas handshakes originally had an explicit and known meaning and purpose, nowadays this meaning is lost or moved into the background, and handshaking, now done automatically, can be said to have become institutionalized.) Such institutionalized traditions are the means of socialization-i.e., the face-to-face enforcement of patterned ways of living together. Hence Berger’s is a communitarian sociology.

The point we want to get to here though is that Berger’s framework holds to a specific theory of language that is like the one implicit in the Manifesto. This theory’s main premise is that language can contain and can carry meaning in the context of community. Shared and stable meanings can be created in community. We can illustrate this point by likening the approach in the Manifesto to the view of science held by Kuhn (1970, 1977). Though the point *is* not often discussed, social relations are central to Kuhn’s view of science. His position is grounded in the view that scientific terms can only attain true meaningfulness within a community of shared scientific activity. Although we generally believe that scientific definition of terms through such devices as the mathematical formula are as definite as definite

can get, scientific terms in fact can be given full meaning only when they are elaborated in scientific practice by a community of scientists. Kuhn illustrated this point convincingly and by so doing, revealed that “paradigmatic” differences actually reflect differences in the life experience of scientists in their work. The reason one scientist cannot understand another who is working in a different paradigm is that the one has not shared the scientific experiences of the other. Hence words cannot mean the same to both. To share a scientific word requires the sharing of experience, in Kuhn’s view.

This is precisely how the accretion of policy meanings around an agency is regarded in the Manifesto. As Kuhn offers a communitarian view of science, so the Manifesto offers a communitarian view of public agency. Hence the agency, in its special dialogue with its environment and within itself, is not “hammering out a policy consensus” about policy issues. Rather, it is creating a *common language*, a *lingua franca*, that contains the shared meanings itself. Thus what is achieved is a language, a way of *talking about things*. And, in principle, once things can be talked about sensibly, issues can be resolved, and the public interest can be enacted.

The mistake that has been made about policy is thinking that agencies deal with issues through the vehicle of policy discourse. Rather, the only true policy issue is finding a common language, a paradigm. Working out the issues then becomes an important matter of detail and calculation. In taking this view, the authors of the Manifesto are calling up a Durkheimian sense of social institution and are holding that it is only within such an institutional context that social issues can be answered. To those with this view, indeed, it is the social institution itself that thinks out the answer to the issue, as Douglas (1986) recently described in her analysis.

In this aspect of the Manifesto we find the work of Gary Wamsley and James Wolf. In his development of the theory of agency, Wamsley is primarily concerned with the agency’s relations to its environment. Wolf adds the interior perspective, arguing that the agency itself is a living web of fragile meanings that are maintained through shared experience and continuing relationships. Hence, according to Wolf, agencies are not instrumental machines but integrated social wholes-communities. When they are violated too far, as in cutbacks through denigrating attacks, they can fail completely and die, as any living organism might do, even though they continue to function in a kind of zombie-like state of living death.

The second dimension of what we call the core logic in the Manifesto has to do with the question of how one can know or trust that the *lingua franca* that the agency creates does indeed contain the public interest. In a sense, this is a moot question, since social institutions are in themselves their own rationale. This is a more European than American way of thinking about social life, however, since with our higher-law tradition of constitutional law, the American mind is wont to seek for an extrinsic referent for institutional actions. One instance of this is our belief in and acceptance of the Supreme Court as final adjudicator of public policy decisions.

On this question, the authors of the Manifesto place their faith in process philosophy, first stated in contemporary form for the field of public administration, perhaps, by Follett (1965). This tradition can be traced back to the Greeks, specifically the Socratic model of reasoned dialogue. It holds that reason, and by the same token correct action-i.e., correct in both the moral and technical sense – is found, or, more accurately, evoked through the creation of a certain type of dialogue. Socrates’ philosophy is a model for this dialogue, and its specifications can be discerned. For example, it seems essential that the parties to dialogue assume, as Socrates did, that they do not know “the answer” and that it therefore can only emerge. Hence a posture of ignorance (in the Socratic sense) is a prerequisite. This is a powerful legitimation, and it is all the stronger for the fact that the invocation of it is a long-standing tradition in the field of public administration. Friedrich (1972) is one traditional theorist who stated that position

explicitly, holding that the legitimacy of administrative actions had to be based in a certain way of talking through the decisions behind the actions. Friedrich called this form of talk or dialogue the “giving of reasons.” Appleby (1945) and Redford (1958, 1969) are other traditional theorists who stated this theme. The basic idea is, if the agency gets the dialogue right, it will produce the right answers and these will be accepted as such. Again, Follett’s idea of the law of the situation is precisely isomorphic to this approach.

One can see this aspect of the Manifesto most vividly in the work of John Rohr, Orion White, Camilla Stivers, and Charles Goodsell, among its authors. In the case of Rohr, the process follows the structured path of judicial reasoning from case to text (of the Constitution) and then from text to case. The judges thereby invoke the higher-law meaning from the text looked at in light of the situation. White’s interest is more in specifying the psychological conditions and the rules of interpersonal dynamics that are most likely to evoke reasoned judgments from a policy dialogue. In a related vein, Stivers’ concern is with finding the conditions most conducive to effective and meaningful citizen participation. Goodsell adds a governing-umbrella idea in the form of what is essentially a process definition of the public interest—a position that has been called “process idealism,” whereby process becomes substance. Moreover, because of the Manifesto’s different paradigmatic grounding, we feel that this perspective on the public interest is novel, falling outside the traditional categories of public interest theorizing that were identified, for example, by Schubert (1961) in his comprehensive critique of theories of the public interest.

In describing this aspect of the Manifesto, we feel it is inaccurate to employ the label “metaphysical” as some commentators on process philosophy and theory continue to insist upon doing. Although the contemporary mind has difficulty with standards of action that do not specify the substantive conditions they entail, this simply indicates that the contemporary mind is just that: contemporary. As we have already noted, the idea of finding wisdom through dialogue is at least as old as Greek philosophy and finds its modern expression in as everyday an institution as the adversarial process of the common-law court. It is a wonder to us that though the weakness of the “rules” approach to ethics and morality, as well as the futility of attempts to specify the conditions of justice in society, has been documented repeatedly in debates about these matters, these-what John Rohr has called “low road” approaches- continue to persist. Our view is that the problems intrinsic to the Manifesto, at least from a postmodern point of view, lie in other and potentially more troubling directions. Before we can get to a discussion of these, however, we must first describe what the postmodern perspective is, both as a philosophical-theoretical framework and as a social viewpoint that is grounded in and produced by the social conditions of late industrial society.

Exploring the Postmodern

How do we describe the postmodern? Here we must to some extent shift our mode of discourse because postmodernism by its nature is rather baffling to the “modern” mind-set of conventional academic discourse. Postmodernism cannot be described in the usual meaning of “description.” Rather, it must be “surrounded,” “suggested,” hinted at, and (we hope) evoked. The frustration that the modern mentality feels at hearing this fact provides the first insight into what postmodernism is.

What we would point to first is that society has changed qualitatively on the level of social experience. The utopian project of modernism that seemed to be realized in the 1950s and carried on throughout the 1960s is no longer alive. Gitlin (1988) provided the following historical accounting of postmodernism:

The 1960’s exploded our belief in progress, which underlay the classical faith in linear order and moral clarity. Old verities crumbled, but new ones have not settled in. Self-regarding irony, and blankness are a way of staving off anxieties, rages, terrors, and hungers that have been kicked up but cannot find resolution. (p. 1)

The postmodern experience is characterized by words such as performativity, commoditization, isolation, depthlessness, surfaces, mutation, simulacrum, historicism, cacophony, and loss of affect. These words are descriptions of experience and texture, and as such, they suggest the circumstances of postmodernity. In modernist terms they denote, collectively, not only a diminishment or loss of “meaning” but, further, a denial that the possibility for “meaning” has ever existed. Hence, postmodernism connotes a theory of “resistance,” whereby one assumes a posture toward life that tolerates fundamental ambiguity and paradox (see Calas & Smircich, 1987). This

requires not simply a paradigmatic shift but a shift to a view that reveals that the idea of paradigm itself is a metaphorical construction. Postmodernism thereby rejects the form or model of truth held by all epistemologies. Paramount to understanding this aspect of the postmodern view is that inherent in postmodernism is the refusal to acknowledge the convention that language refers to anything outside itself-i.e., “reality”; instead, language is a synchronic pattern of contrasts.

The view that we have a mistaken sense of the connection between language and reality underscores two fundamental insights of the postmodern viewpoint. The first is that this error has led us to follow a utopian vision as if it were a real possibility. In other words, we have followed a logic of progress. Some postmodern writers see this point of view as grounded in the Kantian notion of the sublime (Lyotard, 1984, pp. 77-81). Though the mind has both the capacity to conceive and to present, there are some ideas of which we can only conceive and are thereby unrepresentable (i.e., “sublime”). They can only constitute a collectively shared illusion; an illusion that we have shared under modernism.

The second assumption is built upon the first one. In this view, represented by the poststructuralists, not only is the modernist position critiqued but fundamentally is challenged as an “ideological mirage.” This amounts to a claim that all epistemologies-i.e., categorizations of knowledge into defined boundaries-are just grand discourse, or metanarratives. Again, the key point is that when we mistake language for reality, epistemologies or grand discourses are accepted as independent truths that are not subject to question.

The Bonaventure Hotel

In this section we expand our vision of the postmodern by presenting The Bonaventure Hotel as an example of postmodern architecture. In so doing, we hope to some extent to evoke the “feeling” of postmodernism. The Bonaventure has been detailed by Jameson (1984), and it is from his analysis that we draw.

The Bonaventure Hotel, designed by developer Robert Portman, is located in Los Angeles. Portman is well known for the Peachtree Center in Atlanta as well as several Hyatt Regency hotels. One of his most recognized trademarks is the Japanese lantern, gondola-type, “people-mover” elevator.

In the Bonaventure, there are four such people-movers symmetrically stationed upon the four residential towers of the hotel. A gondola for each tower alternately surges skyward to the hotel rooms or descends through a greenhouse roof, coming to rest at the lobby/atrium. The residential towers envelop a miniature lake at the center of the atrium. A great column emerges from the middle of the lake to meet the greenhouse roof, which is six stories from the base of the atrium. Streamers descend in twisting fashion from the top of the roof to the surface of the lake, causing consternation to one’s sense of height, width, and depth.

The Bonaventure epitomizes the postmodern condition of isolation from the city around it. The hotel shuns any association with its surroundings. In stark contrast to the modernist architecture of Le Corbusier and others, Portman did not seek to impose a form upon the hotel’s surroundings, intimating a

utopian vision for the entire city. Instead, the hotel is a self-contained city, “a total space,” that replaces the city rather than connects with it. (Indeed, the management of the hotel refers to it as “the City of Bonaventure” in its brochure.) This isolation is supported by the way in which the entrances to the hotel are concealed from the surrounding streets. Jameson (1984) noted:

The entryways of the Bonaventure are as it were lateral and rather backdoor affairs: the gardens in the back admit you to the sixth floor of the towers, and even there you must walk down one flight to find the elevator by which you gain access to the lobby. Meanwhile, what one is still tempted to think of as the front entry, on Figueroa, admits you baggage and all, onto the second story shopping balcony, from which you must take an escalator down to the main registration desk. (p. 81)

Hence each entrance to the hotel, rather than serving as a segue to the city, serves as a disconnect. In addition to these concealed entrances, the exterior surface of the Bonaventure adds *to* this intentional disassociation from the rest of the city. However, the disassociation projected by the exterior of the edifice cannot be explained purely as separateness. The exterior of the building is covered with glass panels rather than a material surface such as brick or marble. Hence one never really sees the external form of the building. Rather, the glass panels re-present images of the surrounding city in distorted shapes and at obtuse or acute angles. Thus the self-contained miniature city is concealed while both the space within which it is situated as well as the space around it is playfully confounded.

In the interior space of the hotel, perceiving volume is not possible. The streamers that twist down from the greenhouse roof distort all notions of scale; yet, the physical space from the bottom of the atrium to its sixth floor roof is vast. The effect of the streamers in this vast space is such that Jameson (1984), in appropriately postmodern fashion, noted that “. . . a constant busyness gives the feeling that emptiness here *is* absolutely packed* (p. 83). Jameson’s remarks underscore the paradoxical and self-referential feel of the postmodern world. Implicit, and in contrast, to the modern world’s attempts to reduce and unify, the postmodern view shows that the closer one gets to unity, the more one finds complexity and disunity.

In another play on space, the symmetry of the four residential towers is so perfect that when one steps out of a gondola into the lobby of the Bonaventure, gaining one’s bearings is difficult. As evidence of this phenomenon, the merchants of the many shops that are located within the hotel note that customers repeatedly have difficulty finding them.

The Bonaventure clearly is a rich symbol of the postmodern world. The gondolas float in a world of shiny and transparent surfaces made of glass and chrome. One feels as though it is impossible to penetrate to any depth. One walks on and around this hotel in the same way one experiences the postmodern world. There are no long staircases, only short steps upon which to perch oneself on one of the many surfaces. Individuals in the gondolas appear to be levitating rather than physically penetrating defined space. The passenger inside this glass capsule also experiences this distortion. Because the passenger can always see the ground, that space is- really never left behind.

In the midst of the Bonaventure Hotel, one’s affect is attuned to the postmodern experience. A person has the feeling of being included in a myriad of experiences, events, happenings, that overload the senses to the point where the affect is dulled, numbed. Our discussion of the postmodern experience is not a pronouncement of negation. Rather, it is a re-presentation of the circumstances in which human beings find themselves. However, it is an alert that one can no longer harken back to the “solace of good forms.” The formed, structured discourses of modernity are simply incongruent with the postmodern experience.

Postmodernism and Deconstruction

Such analysis as we have just presented frequently evokes the questions, “What are the consequences of postmodernism? How do I act and think in relation to the postmodern experience?” However, framing the issue in this manner merely sets up the pretext for another grand (modernist) discourse or attempt at “truth.” The postmodernist injunction alternatively is always to suspend judgement, resist logical reduction, resist the seduction of being imprisoned by discourse. Finally, it dictates that one suspends the “anxiety to know.” Implicit in this postmodern (poststructuralist) posture is the view that all epistemological arguments are linguistic constructions. These constructions from the postmodern view must be deconstructed to reveal their true nature as discourses. Such deconstruction serves not *to* destroy but to question the irreducibility of the fundamental truths to which discourses are wont to lay claim. Hence what deconstruction does is expose truths as styles of thought or products of discourse.

As stated in the previous section, the postmodern view sees language as synchronic. This view refers of course to the work of de Saussure (1966). The paradigmatic shift that de Saussure accomplished was to show how to regard language not temporally (diachronically) and horizontally but, rather, vertically and structurally (synchronically). De Saussure revealed that language is a system of signs (composed of words and the concepts they evoke) that create meaning by virtue of the relationship they have within the texts that contain them. No sign (the signifier and the signified) carries independent meaning. Rather, the relationship among the signs in a sentence generates a set of contrasts, which stirs one’s affect, thereby configuring a specific pattern of conceptual energy within an individual. It is this pattern of energy that we experience as “reality.” From this point of view the expression of the sign “light” in a sentence, resists singular meaning. The utterance of light (the signifier), and the mental image formed (the signified) contain traces of “dark.” Thus language, from the de Saussurian perspective, is understood as a system of contrasts or oppositions. The postmodern perspective reveals these oppositions to be from a modernist viewpoint “arbitrary.”

Hence words do not truly indicate extrinsic referents. This point of view is clearly in contrast to the modernist view of language. The modern view is suffused by a metaphysics of presence. This means that reality is believed to be an objective, external state-present and existing-independent of discourse about it. The postmodern view denies this and exposes presence not as an objective state but as the product of the contrast between presence and absence.

A Postmodern Perspective on the Blacksburg Manifesto

We hope it is clear from our characterizations that the Manifesto does not reflect a postmodern sensibility. Rather, we would describe the Manifesto as an argument made from the stance of *high* modernism. It is modern in the sense that administration obviously is viewed as a means of creating progress, solving social problems, and bringing about better conditions in society. The central commitment is to reason, as reflected in the public interest and implemented by the public agency. It is a *high* form of modernism in that it goes beyond the anachronistic scientism and rational instrumentalism of classical administrative thought. Rather, it offers process, a structured form of interaction or dialogue that evokes reason - that is a vehicle for it-rather than claiming to embody reason, as classical rational instrumentalism does. In this, the position taken in the Manifesto is quite like that of Habermas (1971, 1983a, 1983b) and his “ideal speech conditions” that are in principle evocative of liberated action and reasoned social policy. The Manifesto contains its own version of the “ideal conditions” of process quite specifically.

It is on this point of ideal conditions for dialogue that modernism-even high modernism-and postmodernism diverge most clearly, since from a postmodern viewpoint, no such ideal conditions can be specified in principle. To postmodernism, the Manifesto is simply an example of discourse, and as such,

no more claim can be made of specifying ideal conditions than can be claimed of any other piece of discourse. Like postmodernism as an experience, where all events and meanings occur on the level of image, and at the surface, deeper claims to “ideals” are pretentious and hollow on the face of it. Hence postmodernism, both as a theory, or way of understanding, and as a modality of social experience, stands as a fundamental challenge to the Manifesto. Even if the authors of the Manifesto wished to discount or ignore postmodernism as a theory, they nonetheless face the task of making it plausible to postmodern audiences, who may or may not apprehend the theory of postmodern experience but who nevertheless hold a sense of social life that denies the validity of arguments for ideal conditions.

To specify the problem somewhat more implicitly, what does it mean to regard the Manifesto simply as another example of discourse, with no valid claim to the stating of ideal conditions? As we noted in the foregoing section, this viewpoint is founded in the perspective on language that developed from the work of de Saussure. One way of describing what de Saussure did was to unground language in the sense of breaking the connection of words to things. Hence, to repeat a point made earlier, texts create a sense of meaning not by referring out to a world of things and events but by referring to *themselves* – i.e., to a pattern of contrasts that organize affect in the reader.

What postmodernist writers seek to reveal is that what is accepted for meaning in the modernist view is grounded only in taken for granted underlying oppositions, or sets of categories or analogies, that themselves can only be sustained, not by reference to an external reality but by other such contrasts. A key strategy in postmodernist analysis is to render the central opposition of a text ambiguous-i.e., dissolve the boundary between the categories it poses and expose the chain of further analogies, oppositions or contrasts that are implicitly sustaining it. In the postmodern social scene this is happening within people’s experience, such that a postmodern sensibility is being generally created. This has occurred through the development of radical social critique followed by the spread of hyperdiversity within society. Some feminists argue, for example, that the widespread awareness (developed over the past 20 years) of sexual anomalies (non-gender-specific Russian “female” track stars, for example), transsexualism, myriad varieties as well as the extent of homosexuality, and even such mundane developments as professional female body builders and the advent of the “sensitive male” have all revealed that the differences between genders essentially are cosmetic, a pattern of crossreferring contrasts that are sustained by the belief that they describe an external “natural” reality. A powerful critique of the entire traditional or Greek view of classification can be found in Lakoff’s (1987) recent book, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*. What happens under conditions in which developments such as these occur is that people begin to regard all distinctions as variations in surface textures only, such that all meaning becomes superficial.

To take a postmodern perspective on the Manifesto, we must seek to uncover its central or core opposition or distinction, the contrast that provides its rhetorical power. From the mood and tone of the Manifesto, we can easily get a reading of the general direction of its central opposition: it speaks of coherence, meaning, and reason as what administration offers, whereas the alternative is incoherence, mindlessness, and capriciousness. Concomitantly, at the core of the Manifesto is the concept of agency and the contrast agency poses, more than implicitly, with the market. The Manifesto writers see the possibility of meaningful and coherent policy and social action developing in the area surrounding the agency. Unlike the market, the agency offers a forum in which citizens can carry out a conscious dialogue about how they want social life to be. They need not leave it up to the capricious implicit devices of the market, expressed either economically or politically. The agency is a stable, coherent forum for reason evoked through rightly ordered dialogue.

It is here, in the mode of dialogue, though, that we find the overlap between the agency and the market. Especially in the work of White, in elaborating the specifics of the dynamics of process, we see that rules

by which a common language is built are precisely like the rules *of* the market. This is symbolized best by the image of reason or the public interest being evoked through dialogue within the agency, and alternatively, the invisible hand operating in the general benefit through the market. The Manifesto's agency is simply an institutional container for a market process of dialogue. On the other hand, though, the market is itself an "institution" and is dependent-as in the process model-upon participants in it acting from a certain stance and with a certain genuineness. In the agency, one submits to the dialogue as containing wisdom; in the market, one submits to market processes as leading to the general good. In the agency, one must follow a set of communication rules that assure authenticity. In the market, one must also act authentically, from one's interest, in order for the process to work for the general good. The image of the individual in Perls' (1969) Ego, Hunger and Aggression is quite compatible with the model of the enlightened, self-interested individual of price theory, though it is Perls' that is taken as one of the main inspirations for process theory.

If our analysis is valid, the Manifesto faces a dangerous pitfall if it is taken seriously in the way that modernist thought is prone to do. That is, the lesson of postmodernism is that dialogue should be taken *as* dialogue and no more. As we noted above, such a stance offers the possibility of play as a way of social life. The alternative is to seek to cover the metaphorical nature of the central opposition on which the authors of the Manifesto ground the meanings that they create. This essentially defensive posture can easily lead to its proponents' violating their own rules of process and becoming false prophets. This is the mistake of those like Bloom (1987), who, in his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, argued that the correct image of the university professor is as a kind of pontificating Socrates. It is easier to sustain dialogue when one sees it for what it is. When one loses sight of its metaphorical grounding, it is all too easy to begin wanting to embody reason rather than letting the dialogue serve as the vehicle for it. Likewise, it becomes easy to fall into the error of regarding the "giving of reasons"-an essential part of maintaining process, as pronouncing facts and technocratic expertise. In such dialogues, we find participants who, instead of participating actively and authentically to give the dialogue life, hold back and wait on the propitious moment when they can pronounce the reasoned conclusion to the discussion. If the postmodern perspective has anything to contribute, one would hope that it is at least to point out that the sort of nostalgic complaint that Bloom makes cannot be a model for rejuvenating dialogue. The postmodern mentality is far too jaded, sophisticated, alienated, and playful to take such pretentiousness seriously.

Conclusion

We have introduced postmodernism to underscore the incongruity between the traditional discourse of public administration, as reflected in the Manifesto, and the social experience of postmodernity. In a sense, we compliment the high modernism of the Manifesto. The emphasis on process philosophy and lingua franca embodied by the agency perspective affirms a genuine attempt to move beyond the trap of modernism. More important, the fact that the epistemology of the Manifesto is located in the interpretivist paradigm indicates its strength in opposing the traditional functionalist view that has predominated too much and too long in American public administration, and we want to acknowledge this. Implicit in the argument of the agency perspective is the recognition that public administration is a heterodox multiplicity of discourses.

Nevertheless, we have also exposed the central paradox of the Manifesto, which is that although the agency and the market are presented as in contrast to one another, the Manifesto's agency is simply an institutional container for a market process of dialogue. Furthermore, there is a righteousness that is implicit in the Manifesto because of the claim that it replaces the functionalist view of public administration with a new and better frame for administrative action. Our point in exposing the central

paradox of the Manifesto is that from the postmodern view, it is simply another example of discourse and is best regarded as such. Furthermore, it is a discourse that is paradoxical rather than irreducible.

This is the message of the postmodern. So, in our endeavors we seek to resist, rather than to oppose, and to suspend judgment, rather than proclaim truth or falsehood. Thus we want to emphasize that from the postmodern view, paradox and ambiguity are not seen as “peculiar” or “wrong” but, rather, as connoting a different level of experience congruent with the complexity of the current social scene.

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