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Review of Postmodern Public Administration: Toward Discourse

Reviewed by Gary S. Marshall, U.S. Department of Commerce

Charles J. Fox and Hugh T. Miller. (1995). *Postmodern Public Administration: Toward Discourse*. Sage Publications, Inc., 175 pp.; \$38.95 hardcover, \$17.95 paperback.

The final decade of this century is proving to be both ruthless and rewarding for all of us in public administration. A period of fractured meaning has displaced the narrative of unity and progress embedded in our modernist consciousness. Postmodernism burst full-tilt onto the public administration theory scene in the late 1980's and has reconfigured the intellectual ground in new and dynamic ways. Because of it, new space for discourse--albeit limited space for idealism and a perceived (perhaps misunderstood)¹ greater space for cynicism exists.

Into the fray enters Charles Fox and Hugh Miller's *Postmodern Public Administration: Toward Discourse*. This exceptional book (1) covers new intellectual ground--namely the authors' proposal for "discourse theory"; (2) outlines many aspects of the postmodern experience; and (3) provides new angles of critique on communitarianism, constitutionalism, and the longstanding rational model of public administration. The authors give us a critique of the present construction of reality in the first half of the book and offer their own construction in the second.

Critique

In addition to presenting new ideas, one of the contributions that this book makes is its cogent explanation of the current contours of public administration theory. The authors first give us a discussion of traditional model of public administration. This discussion is valuable because it provides a critique not only of administration, but also shows how meaning on the "politics" side of the politics - administration dichotomy, is completely diffused. Without being smug, the authors leave us with a sense that the leaders of the bureaucracy are still trying to distill a coherent message and mission from a political reality that fits all the adjectives of postmodernism--depthless, virtual, and artificial.

The traditional model is well known, so I will not reiterate familiar arguments. It is worth noting that the writing in this book is very accessible with well grounded arguments. Hence, Fox and Miller's discussion of the loop model of democracy, ethics reform and civil service reform are well suited for an introduction to public administration. Our authors next take up the a critique of the position articulated in the Blacksburg Manifesto. They assert that while the cause is noble, "constitutional legitimacy is a chimera wrapped in an enigma" (p. 30). Fox and Miller are a bit glib here and while the Blacksburg Manifesto and the writings associated with it provide a rich source of material to critique, the authors don't spend much time developing their critique. They do foreshadow elements of their position:

... constitutionalism-institutionalism fetters inquiry when excessive attention is paid to it.. .. We believe that we would be better off to cease conceptualizing institutions as either entities (a Ia institutionalism) or reified events (a Ia the founding), and instead learn to see overlapping consecutions (sequences or iterations) of phenomenological practices which evince varying degrees of stability (and one might add, relevance, merit, and validity) (p. 31).

Communitarianism also comes under scrutiny in this first half of the book. Its key elements include: human beings as social/political actors; community as the primary unit of analysis; responsible citizenship; and the exercise of practical wisdom. Their critique is embodied in the following quote:

Communitarianism has totalitarian tendencies, in that all aspects of life are gathered up as it were, by the teleological thrust toward a well-ordered harmony. At best, people may find this insufferably boring. At worst, eccentricities would be construed by community fussbudgets as incongruent with community goals--mind numbing conformity becomes the price of membership (p. 35).

The book then turns to an informative discussion of postmodernism. This section is rich with explanation. If you, the reader, have not found other treatments of postmodernism accessible, you'll find this one both readable and engaging. The table below provides a good illustration.

<i>Problematic</i>	<i>Modern</i>	<i>Postmodern</i>
Architecture	Functional, bauhaus	Eclectic, referential
Mode of Production	Mass assembly, factory	Postindustrial, information
Organization	Weberian hierarchy	Adhocracy, devolution
Sociology	Nuclear family	Fragmented households
Philosophy of science	Logical positivism	Methodological anarchy, interpretivism, ideography
Philosophy	Search for universals	Antifoundationalism
Psychology	Integrated authentic self	Decentered self
Ethics	Utilitarian, deontological	Situational
Media	Print linearity	Video montage, MTV, channel surfing

The authors identify four key themes of the postmodern experience. First, stable communication is no longer possible in an age of continually manipulated information and symbols. Second, life is increasingly self-referential. As the line between news and entertainment blurs, our social experience no longer provides a point of reference for what is "real." Third, not only is our reality self-referential, it is also thin and fleeting. Finally, postmodernism suggests a decentered self where all the world is a text. Fox and Miller describe postmodernism almost as a set of objective conditions to be countered. Whereas constitutionalism and communitarianism cannot surmount the conditions of postmodernity, their model-discourse theory just may succeed:

Postmodernity may also defeat discourse and render quixotic our own efforts at a discourse theory of governance. But we have crafted an immune system to some of the viruses infecting other nascent paradigmatic alternatives to orthodoxy (p. 70).

Discourse Theory

In the second part of the book, the authors present their alternative -- discourse theory. To frame their discussion the authors raise a theoretical question and provide a response:

If 'reality' is increasingly ephemeral, how can we capture enough out of it to tease out credible suggestions about what to do next ... More specifically, why do we think discourse theory is at least a conceptually valid response to the situation in which we find ourselves?

The simple answer to the last question is that discourse theory allows affirmation of, and may, when *properly theorized* (italics added), induce improvements in, tendencies already extant in public administration. We want ultimately to valorize proactive participation of public administrators intermingled with others of public-minded communities in policy networks, interagency consortia, adhocracies, and task forces (pp. 77-78).

Fox and Miller propose a specific ontological and epistemological stance for discourse theory. They do so by developing a position called constructivism which melds a specific view of phenomenology together with structuration theory. The ontological stance is informed by the phenomenology of the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty and his notion of the body-subject. Here is a quote in the book from Merleau-Ponty that gives us a feel for his perspective:

The first philosophical act would appear to be a return to the world of actual experience, which is prior to the objective world, because it is in it that we shall be able to grasp the theoretical basis no less than the limits of that objective world, restore things to their concrete physiognomy, to organisms their individual ways of dealing with the world, and to subjectivity its inherence in history (p. 80).

The concept of the body-subject moves away from the Cartesian separation of mind and body. This move is consistent with the postmodern idea of a decentered self². However, the notion of a corporeal or organic self articulated by Merleau-Ponty and advocated by Fox and Miller, is very different from the ontology of poststructuralist writers in that they do make some universal claims. For example, Fox and Miller argue that both the notion of the body-subject and notion of human intentionality are universal to all of us as "body-subjects-in-the-world."

Their epistemological stance begins from the premise that meaning is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). A basic assumption of this view is that we all possess a repository of taken-for-granted assumptions, including the common practice of a handshake. But, as the authors point out, we forget that our reality is constructed because these social practices become habits. Instead, we tend to reify our social experience and "create thought patterns so grandiose that they obscure the daily practices of life from which these categories were primordially derived" (p. 85).

Fox and Miller employ Giddens' structuration theory to address the issue of discussing individual actors, institutions, and ideologies. They cite Giddens as follows:

Social systems, as reproduced social practices, do not *have* "structures" but rather exhibit "structural properties" and that structure exists, as time-space presence, only in its instantiations [manifestations] in such practices and as memory traces orienting the conduct of knowledgeable human agents (p. 87).

Thus for Giddens and for Fox and Miller, reality is constructed by social practices that are governed by structural properties or recursive practices such as formal rules, informal conventions, and/or language. This is a crucial aspect of their position because it vitiates the traditional view of public agencies as monolithic, intransigent structures staffed by nameless functionaries, who perform mindless tasks. Moreover, it suggests that agency practices are more often than not localized, and amenable to change. Here is a brief statement of their position:

Constructivism has this simple message: Organizational reality, what public administrators experience as the flux and flow of daily life, is socially constructed. Because organizational reality is not imposed by

some impersonal material force outside human groups, it is amenable to adjustment by human groups (p. 78).

The presentation of discourse theory is followed by a discussion of the framework under which discourse theory can take place. Based on Habermas' identification of valid conditions for ideal speech and authentic communication, Fox and Miller suggest four practical claims (warrants) for valid discourse. They are: (a) sincerity; (b) situation-regarding intentionality; (c) willing attention; and (d) substantive contribution (p. 120). The authors also suggest where valid discourse might occur:

... we would not suggest the possibility of discursive democracy were there not likely instances of it. Networks of publicly interested discourse which transcend hierarchical institutions provide a feasible model for public administration. Some policy networks, interagency consortia, and community task forces exhibit potential for discourse. In these nascent forms are found think tank experts, legislative staff, policy analysts, public administrators, interested citizens, process generalists, even elected officials participating together to work out the possibilities for what to do next (p. 149).

Conclusion

Here are some issues for you, the reader to consider. It can be argued that while the authors do a masterful job of describing the postmodern experience, they treat it as an objective condition to which a response from a reference point outside the ontology of that experience is required. If so, is this text merely a narrative to explain how and why things have gotten out of control, with discourse theory as the meta-narrative which will return the debate to a space where "rational-critical discourse" is possible? As a corollary, is the discourse theory that Fox and Miller propose capable of connecting or impacting those of a postmodern mindset³?

Fox and Miller have made a significant contribution to the discussion of postmodernism through this book. Such work indicates that there is more to come from these two authors.

Notes

1. I say misunderstood because what is often branded as cynicism and nihilism is also understood as irony and rigorous intellectual innovation. See Calas (1987) and Calas and Smircich (1991).
2. It is a response to the objectivist-relativist trap (Bernstein, 1989) which suggests that either human existence and human knowledge are explainable by a fundamental objective framework, or all events in the world are relative and concomitantly, all knowledge is relative. This condition, known as "Cartesian Anxiety," was an important aspect of the genesis of behavioralism and the general modernist quest for certainty. Fox and Miller do an excellent job of showing the pitfalls of foundationalist thinking in a section on the limits of the current definition of bureaucracy (pp. 92-100).
3. Marshall and White (1990) level this same criticism at the authors of the Blacksburg Manifesto.

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