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Anti-Matter and Public Administration

Reviewed by Gary S. Marshall, University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Farmer, David John (1998). *Papers on the Art of Anti-Administration*. Burke, VA: Chatelaine Press, 212 pp.; \$25.95 paperback.

Papers on the Art of Anti-Administration is a book to which writers in public administration ought to pay attention. It contains thirteen works, which comprise a postmodern response to the central organizing principles of public administration. The volume's title holds special significance in this regard. In the book's introduction, the editor, David Farmer, writes:

The title "Papers on the Art of Anti-Administration" is used to suggest the advantages of reversing the basic organizing idea that motivated Gulick and Urwick in their *Papers on the Science of Administration* (1937). Gulick and Urwick were concerned to contribute to a "science of administration" -a body of epistemologically privileged understandings which could be applied by a hierarchy of experts. Anti-administration, on the other hand recognizes that the traditional Public Administration project has been looking in a limiting direction. (pp. 1-2)

It is this idea-administrative science as a privileged epistemology-which the writers featured in this volume, seek to challenge. The works are thematically quite eclectic, but share a postmodern skepticism toward the public administration discipline. The back jacket cover of the book offers the following summary:

- David Farmer provides a puzzle, looks at public administration discourse as purposeful play and considers the need for regicide.
- Rosemary Farmer explores the unconscious and policy-making.
- Janet Hutchinson provides a feminist view of public administration.
- Hugh Miller and Charles Fox distill the essences of various perspectives on policy topics into a simple chart.
- John Larkin rereads *Paradise Lost* and offers us Satan as administrationist.
- Camilla Stivers takes off on Frost's "Mending Wall" to reflect on postmodernism's utility for public administrators.
- Charles Goodsell explores our need for social anchors and concrete symbols in the postmodern world.
- O.C. McSwite address issues administering anti-administratively.
- Adrian Carr and Lisa Zanetti offer some critical review of three recent books on postmodernism and public administration.

Given the above description one might be tempted to view this book as a rich set of essays fated to remain in the margins of public administration discourse. However, to do so would be to miss the important theoretical developments that make this book special.

Interpretivism and Folklore

O.C. McSwite's essay "Stories from the 'Real World': Administering Anti-Administratively" contains four organizational stories which are effective counter narratives to traditional explanations of organizational life. As McSwite notes, "The way we talk officially about life in public organizations is rather far from the actual experience of work life lived within them" (p. 31). One of the stories aptly titled "Fahrenheit 451" tells of a mailroom supervisor in a federal agency who received many performance awards for managing the agency's mail service operation efficiently. As the story develops we learn that the supervisor, for several years, had been secretly burning "excess mail," i.e., the amount of mail that would cause the mailroom operation to get backed-up. McSwite tells this story not only to bring out the perversity of a reward system that encourages the burning of mail to meet performance goals but also to demonstrate how the employees of the agency rationalized—for many years, on a regular basis—not receiving nor successfully sending important correspondence. (This story took place before e-mail became the primary method of sending and receiving information.)

The Fahrenheit 451 story and the other three stories—defined by the author as organizational folklore—support the interpretivist view of human interaction and especially the work of ethnomethodologists like Garfinkel. They make three important claims that relate to the interpretivist project:

- Social order is improvised on a moment-to-moment basis rather than directed by norms designed to ensure that order is maintained.
- The ethos of rational action, on which organizations are supposedly founded, can be collectively undermined.
- The official model of organizations denies that people are anything more than rational role players whose personal life-worlds do not bear on their performance.

McSwite's analysis does not stop here however. The author makes the point that the message of interpretivism is inherently conservative. McSwite argues the interpretivist project ends in a stalemate. On the one hand, it has demonstrated that human interaction is more akin to a theater performance than the intended rational behavior depicted in most models of organization. On the other hand, it emphasizes the overriding need for social order, which we maintain primarily via the rational model. Interpretivist knowledge in the final analysis becomes "a kind of curiosity" (p. 32) which, valuable as it may be, gets covered over.

The author concludes the essay by suggesting that administrative folklore can support the development of an *arational* model of organization. McSwite notes:

The full dimension 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 they will simultaneously have to suspend faith in their own expertise, place it in doubt and wonder constantly if it can be applied to the present case ... they will need to see themselves as creating a reality for which they are responsible, but over which they cannot have complete control. (p. 33)

A Postmodern Program for Anti-Administration

David Farmer's contribution to this volume is significant. Three of his essays are in this volume as well as a crossword puzzle, which tests one's knowledge of postmodern terminology. Farmer's combined set of essays provide an actual program—a set of strategies—with which to engage the tacit assumptions we share about 20th century public administration. His essays are on efficiency, bureaucratic power and the discourse of public administration. In these essays he reinforces the key arguments presented in his book, *The Language of Public Administration*. In that book Farmer introduced four concepts—imaginization, deconstruction, deterritorialization and alterity. In *Papers* he is at his best deploying these concepts. His essay, "Public Administration Discourse as Play with a Purpose," argues that if writers in public administration theory conceive of public administration as a language game than they'll be better able to work through some of the vexing issues of the field. Here for example, are three tacit rules of the language game as applied when theorizing about public administration:

- 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 payoffs) 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.

His two other essays, "Social Construction of Concepts: The Case of Efficiency" and "Kill the King: Foucault and Public Administration Theory" both work at extending the intellectual space within which we understand public administration. Farmer's work in this volume is also valuable because he cogently rehearses the arguments of writers such as Wittgenstein, Gadamer, Derrida, and Foucault. In doing so he "gets it right" by showing the twists and turns of their arguments and continually makes clear how the views of philosophers and social theorists are relevant to debates in public administration. Farmer's perspective is not that philosophers are the white knights of the academy who will come in and slay public administration theory's intellectual enemies. Rather, he suggests that the discourse of public administration could be much thicker and richer.

Feminism and Analytical Psychology: An Update

Two essays, one by Janet Hutchinson and the other by Rosemary Farmer demonstrate the continued relevance of feminism and analytical psychology to the discourse of public administration.

Hutchinson's essay develops in three stages. She first establishes that the feminist perspective in public administration has developed primarily in the form of liberal feminism. In this context feminist public administration has been concerned primarily with issues of gender equality in the workplace and sexual harassment. In addition, it has sought remediation of these issues primarily through means of legal redress. The author notes:

One could argue that women in the public administration workforce, socialized in the 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 the full rights of citizenship. (p. 58)

Hutchinson then more fully discusses liberal feminism and provides an excellent review of the feminist literature that has subsequently developed in response to the liberal paradigm. Her review includes a thorough discussion of important authors such as Chantal Mouffe and Nancy Fraser.

In the final section of her essay, she introduces the concept of the seriality (Young, 1995). Seriality as applied to feminism suggests that "women may be seen as a collectivity without the need for identifying its members' common attributes or myriad differences" (p. 66). To this point, feminists have faced difficulties in theorizing about gender identity. Feminism has often privileged the norms and experiences of some women over others, or has attempted to avoid categorizing women as a collective social position. Hutchinson maintains that by developing the notion of seriality, a postmodern feminism can be developed which acknowledges the subtle and not so subtle discriminatory practices against women embedded in our culture and is also "inclusive of all, or any woman, whatever their views on feminism ... (p. 68).

Rosemary Farmer 's essay reinforces the importance of the unconscious in organizational life. Her essay adds to the work of others like Denhardt, Diamond and McSwite. In her essay, she makes an analogy between the unconscious and the current postmodern epoch. Both provoke strong reactions from their detractors and both are sites of the "the in-between" (p. 74). The idea of the "in-between" represents a space where ideas and voices, which have been repressed, can be reexamined with irony instead of innocence.

Farmer, a clinical therapist, argues that postmodern administration should de-marginalize the role of the unconscious by: better understanding the role of the unconscious in organizational action, accepting the interpretations of the repressed unconscious and dismantling administrative mechanisms that serve to repress the unconscious. For readers who are not familiar with the analytical psychology literature, Farmer's essay provides an excellent review of it. She also demonstrates powerfully the connection between the Cartesian view of the human subject and the administrative mechanisms, which seem to trivialize and repress the role of the unconscious.

The type of analysis that Farmer suggests in her essay is quite common in the general study of organizations. The work of Manfred Kets de Vries- quite modernist in his approach-is a prime example. It is surprising that the public administration research community has been heretofore less accepting of this type of work.

Postmodern Applications

Camilla Stivers, John Larkin, Charles Goodsell, Hugh Miller and Charles Fox all pay with public administration themes via a postmodern lens. ¹ Stivers' essay, "Deciding the Undecidable: A Few things Postmodernism Might Have to Offer Public Administration," contends that postmodern writers such as Bauman, Derrida and Foucault (implicitly, since she does not mention him by name) reveal two important nuggets to public administrators: the nexus between knowledge and power and the value of contingency as opposed to certainty.

In the introduction to *Papers*, David Farmer notes that in postmodernity: "The dominance of imagination is no longer confined merely to the aesthetic .. in postmodernity, rationalization will still play a role but there will be a shift to the poetic" (p. 5). The essays by Larkin and Goodsell support this point. The authors demonstrate the role of the literary and the visual in articulating administrative life. Larkin's essay, "A Postmodern Reading of Paradise Lost: Satan as Public Administrator" boldly attempts a *Glas*-like interpretation of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Goodsell's essay entitled,

"Public Architecture as Social Anchor in the Postmodern Age," is an abridged version of his research on public architecture. In the essay he maintains that we as a society must continue to create common understanding and that public buildings continue to be a stable referent for the creation of such understanding.

The contribution by Hugh Miller and Charles Fox to *Papers* is a very hip chart entitled: "Multiple Perspectives on Some Epiphenomenal Policy Topics ." The chart is uniquely typeset giving the effect of graffiti on a stone wall. The chart delineates three powerful counter narratives to the modernist discourse of representation. They are "skepticism," "radical absence," and "hyperreality."

A Critical Theorist's Perspective

The final two essays in *Papers* are by two writers who come from a Critical Theory perspective. "Surrealism in Administrative Studies: The Fantastic Used as a Method of Elucidation?" by Adrian Carr and Lisa Zanetti introduces surrealism to the realm of administrative studies. The essay provides a very rich description of surrealism, describing both the history of the movement and the intellectual strategies it employs such as *exquisite corpse* and *automatic writing*. The authors' aim is to demonstrate the ways in which deconstructive strategies like *sous rature* are compatible with surrealist strategies. Carr and Zanetti argue that surrealism and postmodernism have the valuable effect of jarring assumptions we generally take for granted in interpreting our social experience or writing about administrative life. They cite the Brechtian term, "the estrangement effect," to describe the sense of discomfort or dissonance people experience as they write, read or view surrealist and postmodernist texts .

Papers closes with a book review of *Postmodern Public Administration, The Language of Public Administration and Postmodernisms, "Reality" and Public Administration* written by Lisa Zanetti. Zanetti describes herself as a postmodern agnostic which makes her wary of wholly embracing the postmodern perspectives articulated in the books she reviews. In that regard Rorty's pragmatism and Fox and Miller's discourse theory come in for some criticism. However, she is generally sympathetic to the views expressed and argues for the idea of a critical postmodernism. She writes:

I find much about postmodernism to commend it. Suspicion of absolute truths that degenerate into authoritarianism, deconstruction of privileged positions, giving voice to the marginalized and powerless, and analysis of text and content are I believe, important and valuable contribution-many of which owe their intellectual underpinnings to the work of early critical theorists. (p. 202-03)

Conclusion

In public administration we have as part of our underlying ethos the idea that all that we should do should be of value to practitioners. Consistent with this assumption is the idea that it should be positive knowledge to help solve the issues of the day. Such is the norm of a "professional" discipline. But this ethos leaves very little room for dissent and imagination outside the realm of very functionalist paradigm.

Farmer's anti-administration "invites us to include the liberating potential of the postmodern and to aspire toward a fuller notion of citizenship, toward a radical "listening to the other." It entails: an openness to the other, an understanding that no privileged meaning exists, an opposition to meta-narratives, and the imperative to be opposed to existing institutions. Thus the art of anti-administration is more than *contra* administration, i.e., the adversarial point counterpoint that in many ways typifies intellectual discourse. Rather, it contains the possibility of rewriting, of resisting final judgment, of resisting Truth.

Endnote

1 I support the idea of "play with a purpose" as described in David Farmer's essay, "Public Administration Discourse as Play with a Purpose."