

9-1997

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### Recommended Citation

Marshall, Gary S. and Choudhury, Enamu, "Public Administration and the Public Interest: Re-Presenting a Lost Concept" (1997). *Public Administration Faculty Publications*. 72.

<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/pubadfacpub/72>

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# **Public Administration and the Public Interest: Re-Presenting a Lost Concept**

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***Abstract:** This article analyzes how the concept of the public interest has been articulated in the field of public administration. It traces the intellectual development of the term and highlights the differences between a definition of the public interest that emphasizes a "community of meaning" and a definition that emphasizes the "objective control of administration." The article then goes on to discuss how the current debates concerning the postmodern experience inform a definition of the public interest for the 21st century.*

Perhaps academicians ought to take the lead in drawing up a list of ambiguous words and phrases that would never be missed. For such a list I would have several candidates, but it would suffice here to nominate "the public interest." Sorauf (1962, p. 190)

We are free to abandon the concept [of the public interest], but if we do so, we will simply have to wrestle with the problems under some other heading. Flathman (1966, p. 13)

## **Whither the Public Interest?**

These two quotes characterize the venerable debate about the public interest that has richly informed the intellectual history of public administration. In this article, the concept of the public interest is examined in the context of the postmodern experience. During the past 15 years, postmodernism as a mode of social analysis as well as a description of social experience has gained prominence in the United States. For public administration, postmodernism asks the question, Can a collective representation of the public interest exist in a time when the themes of progress, rationality and meaning are being strongly challenged?

As such, what does the concept of the public interest hold for public administration as we enter the 21st century? This article will consider three issues that will help answer this question: first, the concept of the public interest as part of a critical tension that has been central to the history of public administration—the tension between the need for a community of meaning on the one hand and the objective control of administration on the other; second, the influence of the discourse of modernism as represented by the writings of Herbert Simon and others; third, the discourse of postmodernism that has fractured our traditional notions of meaning and our traditional understanding of social experience.

## **The Public Interest: A Critical Tension**

For more than a decade in public administration, an emphasis on the founding period of our country has called attention to the importance of the Federalist/anti-Federalist traditions (Rohr, 1986; Van Riper,

1958; Wamsley et al., 1990). The anti-Federalist/Federalist debate pitted government by dialogue—the need for a community of meaning, on the one hand, against government by distant centralized authority—the objective control of administration, on the other.

The anti-Federalist perspective based on the Rousseauian tradition emphasized social dialogue and collaboration as a means for human interaction (McSwain, 1985). A good summary of this ethos is contained in the statement of George Mason during the debates over the legislative branch:

To make representation real and actual, the number of Representatives ought to be adequate; they ought to mix with the people, think as they think, feel as they feel, ought to be perfectly amenable to them, and thoroughly acquainted with their condition. (Rohr, 1986, p. 40)

In contrast to the anti-Federalist position, the Federalists argued for a strong central government. Bailyn et al. (1977) suggest that what the Federalists had in mind was

a general government that would no longer be a confederation of independent republics but a national republic in its own right, operating directly on individuals and organized as the state governments had been organized, with a single executive, a bicameral legislature, and a separate judiciary. (p. 232)

For both the Federalists and the anti-Federalists, the meaning of the public interest was tied to accountability of the executive branch of government. The Federalist position emphasized accountability to the legislature, whereas the anti-Federalist position argued for closer public accountability of the government through a decentralized process. Thus, for the Federalists, the public interest meant an efficient administration within the boundary of legal accountability; for the anti-Federalists, it meant an effective administration informed by a continuing interaction with the public.

### **Changing Social and Political Conditions**

This tension between the Federalist and anti-Federalist principles became even more apparent as the industrial revolution took hold in the United States. The political and social conditions of this period have been well documented (Hofstadter, 1955; Link & McCormick, 1983; McConnell, 1966). The industrial expansion of the United States began to shift after 1830 from a predominantly agrarian society to an industrial society. By 1900, 40% of the American population was located in urban centers such as New York, Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia (Bailyn et al., 1977).

This period of industrial expansion and subsequent consolidation created a set of diverse political expectations and social conditions. On one hand, there were the unregulated interests and concentrated economic power of the industrialists; on the other hand, there were the interests and distributed wealth of individuals who were farmers, local merchants, and industrial workers. In this environment of rapid industrial expansion, public administration provided an institutional framework through which the disparate tensions of the national community could be addressed. To this end, the public interest was a symbol that gave meaning to the activities generated through this framework.<sup>1</sup>

The field of public administration responded to the material requirements of a modern administrative state required in the wake of industrial expansion. This was reflected in the infrastructure needed for the cities and the need for regulation of monopolies. Between 1870 and 1930, five federal departments and three regulatory agencies were formed (Woll, 1977). With the delegitimation of party politics and the rise of interest groups, administrative agencies were regarded as the locus for the reconciliation of disparate interests (Lowi, 1969; McConnell, 1966). The tension between the Federalist principles and the antifederalist principles was mediated through administrative agencies' activities in the governance process. Administrative agencies were seen as stable and legitimate institutions. The agencies' legitimacy

was recognized by their (a) constitutional authority (establishing an agency is an act of law), (b) political base, (c) expertise, and (d) normative view of the public interest.

The public interest was a stable point of reference around which members of different groups in society could give voice to their interests. As a guide for citizens and administrators alike, it gave meaning to the idea that all groups in society had a stake in the well-being of that society's growth and development.

As public administration entered the 20th century, the role that was being carved out continued to take shape. For the first three decades of the 20th century the field of public administration was very attached to the symbols of rationalism and science; yet, it also preserved (albeit implicitly at times) the democratic ideals of administration, emphasizing the importance of the citizenry and the public interest.<sup>2</sup>

## **The New Deal and World War II**

The expansion of the administrative state during the New Deal period and during World War II also had a profound effect on the field of public administration and in many ways strengthened the normative meaning of the public interest. Many public administration stalwarts served in key positions during the war effort, and their hands-on experience gave them a different perspective on administration. In a move away from the scientific aspects of the Progressive movement, writers such as Waldo, Redford, Dimock, Appleby, and Sayre, writing in the 1940s and 1950s, emphasized the "community of meaning" aspect of public administration.

These writers are identified as the traditionalists by White and McSwain (1990). The key tenets of the traditionalist perspective include (a) an emphasis on the concept of the public interest, (b) an informed pragmatism, and (c) a communitarian ethos. White and McSwain delineate four axioms of the traditionalist movement. First, the realities of history served to place administrative action at the center of a government responding to a society in crisis. Second, the administrative agency was seen as the center of a group of policy communities. It was a repository of meaning for administrative action and societal values. Third, administrative action was seen not as a rational linear science but as evolving from the institutional context and the social process of an agency. Fourth, the traditionalists sought a structural understanding of administrative affairs. They argued that it was important to understand the underlying archetypal events that occurred in public administration. This structural understanding would provide a line of action in the context of overdetermined social forces. White and McSwain articulate six working principles related to these axioms:

- The idea of the public interest as a guide to administrative action;
- The public weal and the well-being of public agencies as synonymous;
- Effective control of agencies by Congress and the political executive;
- The case study method as the most effective way to learn the correct sensibility of a public administrator;
- The pragmatic, experimental approach to action as the way to achieve effective administration;
- Collaboration achieved through dialogue as essential to effective administrative action and policy making.

The traditionalists carried forward this view in their deliberation of the meaning of the public interest. They made it a central concern in the exercise of discretion and the responsible use of expertise in determining and modifying public policies. This shift in emphasis enabled the emergence and institutionalization of a mediative role for agencies with public administrators as architects and trustees of the public interest.

## The Post-World War II Era

After World War II, the emphasis in public administration shifted decisively toward a refined rationality that defined knowledge exclusively in terms of empirical evidence and scientific technique. This change emanated from the dramatic technological innovations that came about during and immediately after World War II. In the social sciences these changes were exemplified by the use of positivist methodologies in research and development and the rational model of organization in administration. In the field of public administration, Simon's (1957) *Administrative Behavior* was the most influential expression of this emphasis on technique. In Simon's model, the significance of administration is as a tool to solve technical problems. According to Denhardt (1981), the model of organization that was generated by this view included the following:

- Strict adherence to the philosophical doctrine of logical positivism;
- A clear separation between facts and values;
- A clear separation between administration and policy;
- A formal organizational structure that assumes stable, rational behavior exemplified by uncomplicated role expectations;
- Behavior designed around organizational goals;
- A closed group of experts, who by virtue of the organizational structure direct the implementation of those goals;
- A view of activity in public agencies as objective behavior;
- Activity in organizations as distinct from activity outside the organization.

In this context, the concept of the public interest did not fit well with this model of administration. The reason why the public interest concept did not find any role in the rationalist approach to administration goes beyond the normative status of the concept. In Simon's model of administration, the very techniques that render administrative behavior rational at the same time make the consideration of the public interest unnecessary. For example, the "satisficing" criterion renders public input and continuous public participation in administrative decision making redundant, particularly in the face of increasingly sophisticated techniques of data collection and inference. Another way in which the value of the public interest becomes eclipsed rests on Simon's (1957) "area of acceptance," which places powerless interests outside the purview of administrative concern. Finally, the reliance on efficiency gives primacy to predictable results. Thus, in the rationalist approach, it is solely the ends that matter—not only for the administrators involved but presumably for the affected public as well. Such an approach compels administrators to rely uncritically on instrumental techniques rather than seek clarification of what the public interest is in an open dialogue. For the rationalist, the meaning of public interest thus ends in becoming what the experts have determined. The traditionalist notion of the public interest acting as a normative guide for administrative conduct thus finds no relevance in the rationalist approach to administration. Instead, it was argued that a normative view of the public interest was an idealist position that would perpetuate a philosopher king mind-set as the model for the good administrator.

In his book, *The Public Interest*, Schubert (1960) argued,

The Idealists would maximize (or, at the very least, expand) the scope of official autonomy and discretion, thus placing all "public servants" in the heart of the policy-making process. This necessitates a highly moral official world, which becomes personified in the image of the Independent Congressman, the Strong President, the Good Administrator, and the Wise Judge. (pp. 223-224)

In contrast, the rationalist view placed an emphasis on analytic tools. As Sorauf (1962) notes,

The practitioners of politics, just as the academic political scientists, need phrases which will clarify competing interests, separate the "is" from the "ought," shield the debate from undue moralism, and frame practicable and specific policy alternatives. Above all, they need intellectual tools for discussing the morality and wisdom of political policy, not in vague moralization and rationalizations but in terms of identifiable results and consequences in terms related to the policy itself. (p. 190)

Thus, in the eyes of writers like Sorauf, Schubert, and Simon, the public interest did not qualify as a legitimate and effective tool. Rather, the concept of the public interest offered only ambiguity and the possibility for unaccountable personalistic judgments. For these writers, the public interest is a concept that is defined by its presence. And, because it cannot be present in the form of an objective operationalizable concept, it becomes permanently absent. This underscores an epistemological commitment to representation-the central theme of modernism.

During the zenith of modernism that is associated with the social, political, and technological developments in the 1950s and 1960s, public administration was viewed in terms of its ability to define and solve technical problems efficiently. By establishing a rather narrow boundary around the definition of public administration, only one type of rationality-instrumental rationality was important, and only one type of human action--conscious behavior--was given attention. As a result, the search for a community of meaning associated with the metaphysical view of the public interest was less relevant and became marginalized.

### **Recent Discussions of the Public Interest**

The political scientist Richard Flathman (1966), who is quoted at the beginning of this article, argued that although one can explain away the concept of the public interest, it will always remain central to the discourse of public administration. A vigorous discussion of the public interest has reemerged in the so-called *Blacksburg Manifesto*. The writers, from Virginia Tech's Center for Public Administration and Policy, wrote a compelling manifesto that sought to redress the persistent attacks against public administration and the governance process. As part of that original work, the authors point out that the mistake of writers like Sorauf, Schubert, and Simon is their insistence that the concept of the public interest be present in order for it to be valid. Moreover, the manifesto is successful in contributing to the discussion of the public interest because it acknowledges that an understanding of the public interest must include both presence and absence simultaneously. In the words of the authors, "The search for the specific content of the public interest in the positivist tradition has blinded us to yet another approach to defining its nature: that we have learned a good deal about what the public interest is not" (Wamsley, et al., 1990, p. 41). The manifesto goes on to argue for a more contingent view of the public interest. The authors conclude,

The practical and beneficial consequence for public administration of accepting the public interest as being under *continuing review* [italics added] is a perspective that fosters (1) tentative steps and experimental action rather than "solutions" for this and "wars" on that, (2) curiosity and dialogue about the ends as well as the means, (3) individuals who learn as well as respond, (4) humility and skepticism about grand designs, (5) greater awareness of the unique responsibility and potential contribution of each participant in the dialogue about the public interest, and (6) greater attentiveness to the language of public discourse. (Wamsley et al., 1990, p. 42)

The authors of the *Blacksburg Manifesto* develop their views more fully in a book, titled *Refounding Public Administration* (Wamsley et al., 1990).<sup>3</sup> The concept of the public interest is addressed in detail by Charles Goodsell. In his work, Goodsell affirms the nexus between public administration, the public interest, and the public. He also suggests six values that are central to the public interest: legality-

morality, political responsiveness, political consensus, concern for logic, concern for effects, and agenda awareness (Wamsley et al., 1990).

The view of the public interest asserted by the authors of the *Blacksburg Manifesto* is ultimately an example of high modernism (Marshall & White, 1990). On one hand, it moves past assertion that the concept of the public interest is invalid if it cannot be operationalized. On the other hand, its attempts at meaningfulness and representation are inconsistent with the postmodern experience.

### **Postmodernism and the Public Interest**

Increasingly, the promise of modernism has been called into question. The complexity of our social life is akin to the Brownian description of small particles dispersed in a fluid medium that move in a constant, random zigzag movement when they collide with the molecules of the fluid (*Websters New World Dictionary*, 1974). There are far too many inputs to successfully predict the outputs. The impact of the postmodern experience has been felt both in the arena of social life and in the arena of philosophical discourse. Terms such as *depthlessness*, *commodification*, and *hyperreality* have often been used to describe the effects of postmodern life. <sup>4</sup> Descriptions of the postmodern experience and its impact on public administration have been well documented (Fox & Miller, 1995; Marshall & White, 1990; McSwite, 1996; White, 1992). As suggested recently by Fox (1996),

The postmodern analysis finds that words, symbols and signs are increasingly divorced from direct real-world experience .... In the consumptive economic mode of postmodernity, symbols float away, as it were, and procreate with other symbols leading to what Jameson (1991) calls "the free play of signifiers." ... Willie Horton becomes a logo for Massachusetts penal policy, "read my lips" for a fiscal policy, and Clinton a modifier for "big-government-tax-and-spend" when attached to health plan or welfare reform. (p. 257)

In the arena of philosophical discourse, postmodernism raises some important questions as they relate to knowledge in social science and consequently to the concept of the public interest. An aspect of the current postmodern debate that may provide some insight is the discussion around modernist epistemology. Beginning with Descartes, the human subject became both the subject and object of knowledge. His famous quote, "I think, therefore I am," is the seminal example of this concept. Descartes tells us that even when doubting his own existence, his doubting (thinking) assures him that he exists. Thus, the assumption of Cartesianism is that consciousness is assured through an inner voice that tells us that we are experiencing a distinct reality that is a clear and transparent representation of the natural world. As suggested by Benhabib (1984), the task of modernist epistemology "was how to make congruent the order of representations in consciousness with the order of representations outside the self .... In knowledge, mind had to 'mirror' nature."

### **Jacques Derrida**

One writer who takes up this issue is Jacques Derrida, whose writings have been powerfully influential in creating new intellectual space for writers in the social sciences. For Derrida, all the world is a text, whether these texts be written documents, institutional practices, or events that occur in a given culture. In his work, he introduces the idea of deconstruction, which has evolved along with the postmodern line of thought. It is a strategy that exposes the devices by which meaning is created in traditional writing and discourse. Traditional writing and discourse imputes meaning to the words that we speak. The deconstructive stance follows the Saussurean (1966) tradition, which argues that language is a closed system of signs and that meaning emerges from the differences between elements of this system. This

latter view of language has become more widely accepted, in part because it is consistent with the continual reconfiguration of symbols and signifiers characteristic of postmodern social experience.

Derrida argues that the result of modernist epistemology is a logocentric view of the world, wherein conscious thought is valued as the dominant mode of interpretation. Within that framework, certain terms are privileged over others. Consider the view that meaning is grounded in underlying oppositions or categories, such as good/bad, mind/body, and male/female. The deconstructionist position argues that within these oppositions, one of the terms is valued over the other term. Derrida (1976) argues that given a pair of opposing terms, the term that seems to be subordinated and marginalized both gives meaning to the dominant term and stands alone based on its own definition. He suggests that the marginalized term supplements its opposite.

The "logic of the supplement," as Sturrock (1979) puts it, is that "the distinguishing characteristics of the marginal are in fact the central object of consideration." The effect is to question the univocal status of any text that results in enriching a discourse by reintroducing terms that had been pushed to the margins. In addition, it reinforces the point that words derive meaning not from their relationship to external referents but from their relationship to their opposites.

### **The Public Interest and its Central Oppositions**

In view of Derrida's approach, what can we say about the concept of the public interest? For writers like Sorauf, Schubert, and Simon, the concept of the public interest was of little use to the development of knowledge in public administration because it could not be operationalized. In contrast, the writers of the *Blacksburg Manifesto* subsequently sought to reassert the marginalized aspects of the public interest. With that understanding, several oppositions surface in the definition of the public interest:

|             |                |
|-------------|----------------|
| Efficiency  | Reflection     |
| Certainty   | Contingency    |
| Science     | Social process |
| Facts       | Values         |
| Objectivity | Subjectivity   |

A Derridean perspective would suggest that the relationships between the oppositions mentioned are self-referential. At the height of modernism, the terms in the left-hand column were dominant. Those terms, and the arguments that emanate from them, gained explanatory power both by marginalizing their opposites and by referring to an overarching external referent-rationality. Expanding this Derridean notion a bit further, the terms listed in the right-hand column-asserted by the writers of the *Blacksburg Manifesto*- do supplement their opposites. However, neither column can claim univocal status. The "meaningfulness" of the Manifesto's position can be as easily appropriated as the "value neutral/efficiency" argument of Sorauf, Schubert, and Simon. Many of the marginalized aspects of the public interest are reasserted by the manifesto's position, but it makes reference to an overarching external referent as well. The manifesto view makes an external claim to the public interest as embodied in the sound wisdom and institutional knowledge of public administrators.

For a postmodern discourse, neither the soundness of the wisdom or the knowledge that remains institutionalized can be taken for granted as valid. The reason for such suspicion stems from the postmodern condition of public administration itself.

The distinctiveness that the term *public interest* symbolized for public administration has lost its signification amid the continual blurring of boundaries with other institutional domains. For example,



members of public agencies are increasingly called upon to play a substitute role of guardian, teacher, minister, or parent. These expectations often create role ambiguity for administrators in an institutional context where they are still expected to define and defend their actions in dispassionate and neutral terms. The proliferation of meaning regarding the public interest, where different institutional values have become overlaid one upon the other, and which are in constant tension, has led to a crisis of identity and a crisis of representation within public sector institutions.

Given this crisis of representation, the efforts of the *Blacksburg Manifesto's* authors to resurrect the integrative value of the public interest—an integration between the requisites of democratic administration and those of the objective control of administration—no longer finds resonance in the fractured experiences of the public and the ambiguity of meaning that administrators confront. Because an integrationist view cannot escape the instrumental techniques of modern administration, the reliance on such techniques (i.e., need surveys, policy analysis, expert systems) precipitates a disintegrative effect in the constitution of the public and in their experiencing of the government.

A postmodern critique points to the fracturing effect of the modernist techniques of administration—an effect that is embedded in the techniques themselves rather than in the failure of administrators to put them to proper use. The postmodern debate, inasmuch as it challenges social inquiry, does the same to administrators by inviting them to "address questions about new technologies, new configurations of mass culture, new modes of experience, and expression, new forms of interpersonal relationship and identity, and new types of cultural criticism" (Antonio & Kellner, 1994, p. 147).

## **Conclusion**

Thus, what the recognition of postmodern experience does is free up the dialogue of public administration both from the limiting effects of the rationalist assertions and the captive predicament of the traditionalist's aspirations. Such freedom or release from the tacit meanings that the traditionalist and rationalist cognition have institutionalized comes from the postmodern recognition of the inclusive and interpretive nature of meaning. Such a recognition not only brings into question the way in which administrators engage the public but also how they talk about, and justify, their actions.

In a postmodern discourse, the meaning of administrative terms and acts, rather than construed in oppositional form (wherein it becomes not only easy but necessary to deny or marginalize felt identity and expression by an act of authority or expertise), is apprehended in a compositional form by making disparate interests and identity inclusive of administrative decision. It is in such acts of composition that the test of the soundness of wisdom lies. The compositional act cannot assume stable identity or interests nor can it depend on logical inference to locate the meaningfulness of this interest or that identity. Binding the public in a more intense and meaningful way is an act of composition and thus does not require a metanarrative to orchestrate meaning.

In addressing the emergent conditions, one cannot uncritically rely on the techniques of modernist administration but must continually seek the concurrent application of postmodern strategies of observation and dialogue (e.g., deconstruction, ethnography, discourse analysis). Thus, public interest as a symbol is re-presented differently in light of the postmodern experience, expressing what is unstated, suppressed, or unattended to in the traditionalist and modernist conceptualizations of the term. The nature and terms of conversation about interests and identity change wherein difference is not pushed to the periphery.

It is a composite meaning of the public interest that offers the best hope to make public agencies relevant to the people who live under their authority and expertise. Inclusion rather than integration (the latter the

traditionalists seek) and interrelatedness rather than differentiation (the latter the modernists value) are the sought-after effects that the symbol of public interest needs to evoke as we enter the 21st century. There is no overarching narrative that will intervene on behalf of any of us. This position, however, leaves us aware that we are all responsible for that which is done in the name of the public interest.

## Notes

1. The railroad industry exemplifies one activity that required regulation. Its vital role as the transportation network that fueled the nation's economic expansion and its uncontrolled business practices make it a model illustration of the imbalances inherent in the shift from an agrarian to an industrial economy. The influence of the railroads manifested itself through (a) discriminatory rates; (b) rebates to powerful shippers; (c) payoffs to state legislators; and (d) high rates where no competition existed, coupled with below-market rates in competitive locations. These practices forced smaller shippers out of business, creating monopolies and financial behemoths that worked against the economic interests of individuals and small businesses. Sentiment was so strong against the railroads that farmers burned their crops rather than submit to the railroads' monopolistic practices.

In response to this situation, Congress, via the Interstate Commerce Act, created the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) in 1887. In 1889, it became an independent regulatory commission and foreshadowed the increased role of administrative agencies in the governance process. Administrative practice in the ICC foreshadowed an experimental approach to government regulation that later became the hallmark of public administration in the 1940s and early 1950s.

2. In many ways, it seemed to value community and the public interest, yet methods were employed that resulted in administration at a distance through the need for objective control. Haber's (1964) well-known classic *Efficiency and Uplift* aptly describes the inherent tension: "Though marching with the people, the progressive reformers clearly marched at their head. Progressive political reform often seemed to involve a singular attempt to bring government close to the people and at the same time keep it somewhat distant" (p. 78).
3. Three additional authors contributed to the book: Camilla Stivers added an emphasis on the role of citizen participation in governance; Phil Kronenberg, a Virginia Tech faculty member who was on leave when the original document was written; finally, Robert Bacher coauthored a chapter with Jim Wolf on public service occupations.
4. Hyperreality-reality has collapsed, and today it is exclusively image, illusion, or simulation. The model is more real than the reality it supposedly represents (Rosenau, 1992, p. xii).

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