

Book Reviews

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Rethinking Governance and Bureaucracy: Down with the King?

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David John Farmer, *To Kill the King: Post-Traditional Governance and Bureaucracy* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2005). 215 pp., \$24.95 paperback, ISBN: 0-7656-1481-2.

How would our lives be different, asks David Farmer, if we were to adopt the *phyrronist* attitude of second-century physician Sextus Empiricus, accepting our experience for what it appears to be but suspending final judgment as to what it truly represents? The *phyrronist's* response to life does not differ all that much from that of the rest of us. For example, if "it appears to him now (if it does) that a dog is threatening to bite him and it appears to him now (if it does) that he should climb a tree, he can happily climb up a tree" (71) without ever taking a position one way or another as to whether appearances convey a full understanding of reality.

Because our disputes almost invariably focus on what things are rather than on what they appear to be, the *phyrronist* develops not only a certain peace of mind (*ataraxia*), a sense of freedom from the characteristically modern struggle to establish this or that as certain truth but also—and this is of particular relevance for those in public service—a more hesitant, tentative, and reflective response to life events. Farmer recommends adopting the *phyrronist* attitude as one way of "Thinking as Play," the first of three principal themes explored (along with "Justice as Seeking" and "Practice as Art") in his collection of essays on post-traditional governance, *To Kill the King*.

By moving beyond traditional notions of justice toward more open-ended and tentative ones, Farmer demonstrates his grounding in both economics and philosophy—for example, when he smoothly moves from Agamemnon's belief in vengeance and retribution, to John Rawls's formulation of fairness, to Carol Gilligan's understanding of the incompatibility of rational justice and an ethic of care. He closely links the tentative view of justice with his concept of *anti-administration* such as in contrasting our well-known

Golden Rule with the Silver Rule of Confucius: "Do not do to others as they should not do to you" (121). Although the two may be logically equivalent, he points out, the alternative privileging of action versus hesitation that characterizes Western and Eastern traditions, respectively, has important implications for action. Thus, the Western tradition, with its emphasis on certainty in faith, conversion (and worse) of heretics and infidels, pursuit of martyrdom, and the like, has evolved a far different conception of the role of public institutions than has an Eastern tradition, which is more concerned with hesitancy, quiet wisdom, and humility.

Farmer draws on a broad range of concepts in probing the "unexamined rhetoric" of market economics' so-called invisible hand, considering not only the familiar work of Adam Smith but also lesser known works, such as that of Bernard de Mandeville, who proposed in his 1714 *Fable of the Bees* that "[E]very Part was full of Vice, yet the whole Mass a Paradise" (156), the now-popular belief that the aggregation of private luxury, greed, and envy can bring about the public good. Farmer similarly challenges many commonly accepted beliefs about the relationship of the market to the public sphere, namely, that capitalism is a unitary economic system opposed by socialism and that the operation of markets is largely independent of the network of laws that govern society.

Perhaps the most thought-provoking ideas that Farmer raises follow from his examination of the very "visible hand" of leadership. Here, he takes on what may be the most paradoxical aspect of leadership: that despite our great desire to think and act on our own values, preferences, and interests, there is also, deep within us, a longing to be led. Drawing on object-relations theory, Farmer suggests that our longing may be transferred from "loved, needed, or even traumatizing" figures of our childhood. Yet he finds this "cult of leadership" particularly relevant to the adult world of public bureaucracy, suggesting that the relations of dominance and subordination sustained by it render

mainstream administrative thought “what subordinates dare say openly to superiors” and mainstream reinvention or reengineering theory an “apology” for what we do in practice, one that reassures the public that we have no “unfixable machinery” (147).

The “king” that Farmer proposes to kill is the one who has come down to us in the Hobbesian exchange of our primacy as individuals for the security of our common allegiance to a “Mortall God”—that is, for the hierarchies of coercion and control that continue to be embedded in our relationships with one another. He finds that these power hierarchies cannot be overcome through representative democracy as we now know it. I would suggest that the continuing controversy surrounding Ralph Nader’s role in the 2000 election provides an excellent demonstration of Farmer’s point that there are is “no *right* decision rule for aggregating preferences,” even though, given the power of the status quo in maintaining traditional practices, this “dirty little secret” remains unexamined (188–89).

To kill the king, Farmer suggests, the “practitioner as artist” should be prepared to participate in opening democracy to a “citizen turn.” The process will require the development of a language of democracy that can be described as new but that also draws on the historical ideals of civil society that have come down to us from the work of Aristotle, the Scottish Enlightenment, and Thomas Jefferson’s assertion that republicanism (small *r*) is to be found not in the constitution, but in the “spirit of the people” (193).

To Kill the King is not focused on issues of efficiency, service, or “running things more like a business” in the way we have come to expect from books on pub-

lic-service reform. Instead, following from his belief that in order to achieve genuinely post-traditional forms of governance and must go beyond mere tinkering with the status quo, Farmer challenges deep-level assumptions that are generally left intact by more conventional work. To bring about meaningful change in our field, he argues, we must reexamine the way we think about ourselves, the values we adopt, and the way we act as public servants. Central to these arguments, I think, is the assertion that in its long-standing efforts to cast itself as a value-free science that unreflectively pursues given goals, public service has lost touch with and must now reclaim an essential aspect of its character as a reflective, moral art. Although it is presented in his gentle, often humorous, at times irreverent way, Farmer’s assertion poses an important and powerful challenge to the contemporary status quo.

Although we, both as a profession and a society, may no longer be willing to accept a “trust me, I’m an expert” role for public administration, reform efforts that do little more than tweak the field at the surface level have yet to succeed in challenging that role. It is for this reason in particular that I find Farmer’s alternative vision of administrators as moral artists to be of great relevance for our field. Although work of this kind may not be what public administrators are generally reading today, it is, in my view, the kind of work they *should* be reading. I have adopted it as one of the texts for a graduate course I teach in alternative approaches to public organization, and I recommend it highly to both scholars and practitioners who would consider looking beyond an increasingly stale traditional conception of public-sector reform toward fresh and insightful alternatives.

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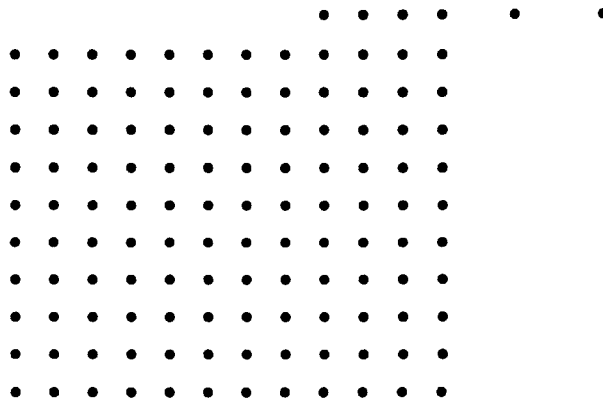
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