BOOK REVIEWS

The "Other" Language of Public Administration

David John Farmer. 1995. *The Language of Public Administration: Bureaucracy, Modernity and Postmodernity*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

It is incumbent on me as reviewer to state at the outset that Farmer's book is the other one. That is to say there are two books published in 1995 that relate to the postmodern problematic as it affects public administration: The one under review here and our own (Fox and Miller 1995). Despite a common focus, the approaches are widely divergent. My recommendation (however self-serving this might seem) is that those who wish to "get it" about the postmodern problematic read the two books in tandem. The main difference between the two approaches, as I see it, is that Miller and I take postmodern arguments and judge them; we appropriate them or not according to our own project of reconstituting democratic policy will formation. We try to make a lean and linear argument. Farmer, on the other hand, explores the problematic from many sides. Our book is short, his is long. Our book can be read and grasped in almost one sitting. Farmer's should be read more leisurely, savored, then read again.

In this book, David John Farmer displays knowledge and wisdom unequaled by anyone I know who is currently writing in our discipline, public administration. This book is truly a tour de force. Farmer is admirably comfortable across an incredible array of disciplines and literatures: economics (all variants), sociology, psychology, social work, organization theory, and, of course, public administration theory. Importantly, his knowledge of these disciplines is enriched by a sophisticated and broad grasp of philosophy and those contemporary philosophers who contribute to exploration of the postmodern problematic. It is not often that I can say this about a book: I learned a great deal from reading it.

The Farmer book is too rich to summarize in the space allowed here. Instead, I will reveal its strategy. Farmer takes our literatures piece by piece and explicates what they contribute to our understanding of what we public administrationists and

administrators do. Then, instance by instance, he takes these literatures to the farthest extent—the limits of what a cluster of concepts can inform. At the outermost limits he exposes the blind spots, gaps, contraries, and shortfalls of that particular theoretical orientation. (It is important to note that each of these explorations is extraordinarily informative; one learns how to situate, for instance, Simon, Habermas, Freud, and Jung and the post-modernists Derrida, Foucault, Baudrillard, Lefort, Lecan, Deluze, and Guittari. Farmer has painted for those willing to engage this text a constellation of thinkers and their products that is profound, and taxonomically informative. Graduate students or newly minted PhDs can read this book at great profit.)

In chapter after chapter this strategy is played out. There are virtues to the notion that public administration is about particular expertise applied to policy problematics. But, at the outer limits of the fecundity of this approach is a daunting limitation: particularism ignores the forest for the trees. Likewise, much can be learned from the application of positivist scientistic methodological protocols. But at the outer limits of the fecundity of this approach the epistemological surety or fixity of findings based on these protocols turns out to be chimerical. Similarly, the application of techniques (technologism) in public administration has had enormous benefits but is blind to ethical considerations. Another example is markets. Markets, privatization, entrepreneurialism and the like are powerful tools and orientations. Markets and free enterprise, however, cannot bear the burden of universal panacea. Blind spots become evident when market failures and the context of systems governance (government provision of police powers, enforcement of contracts and physical infrastructure) are brought to bear. So transcendent is Farmer that even the key alternative to the positivist scientism he otherwise criticizes—that is, hermeneutics (interpretavism/constructivism/critical theory)—is considered for its power and then its limitations and blind spots. The power is its capacity to explicate ideology and domination. But hermeneutics, it turns out, is limited, has blind spots, because it attempts a metanarrative or totalizing archaemedian (Gods-eye) standpoint.

Farmer then takes up four themes of postmodernism and applies them to public administration: imagination, deconstruction, deterriorialization, and alterity. Again, these explorations are too rich to replicate in short space. Instead, the strategy is displayed. Farmer's project is to render as sensible various post-modern perspectives. Sensible, that is, to public administrationists and administrators. One might say that chapters 4 through 8, while each acknowledges the fecundity of modernist/mainstream public administration science and practice, explore the limitations

of each constellation of concepts in a way that leaves them open to postmodernist alternations or subversions.

Farmer's discussion of *imagination* suggests that in the postmodern era imagination, understood as poetics, will gain purchase over the rationalism, logocentrism, that characterized the modern era. Deconstruction is mined by Farmer to deny privileged status to the power talk that emanates from bureaucracy. Deterritorialization is a postmodern theme appropriated by Farmer to point to a kind of entropy of knowledge and thinking. "The conditions and possibilities for knowledge change. Postmodernity means the end of the logocentric metaphysics of presence. 'Theorizing' as it is known terminates because postmodernity means the end of representationism, the end of grand narratives, and the end of history" (p. 225). A discussion of alterity leads Farmer to "antiadministration." Antiadministration highlights "openness to the 'other,' a preference for diversity, an opposition to metanarratives, and opposition to the established order" (p. 244).

This summary of Farmer's strategy does not do it justice. What is continually amazing, page after page, is his openness and tentativity. Farmer seems to indwell within all the arguments and theories upon which he touches. He appreciates or even loves them. Then his gesture shows their partiality and limits. What is virtuous about this approach is its invitation to discourse. It is not his place to stop the conversation by imposing some sort of authoritative interpretation.

As is often the case, a major strength turns out also to be a weakness. Farmer's book will probably not establish for him an identifiable niche. He will not be easily cited as "one of those" arguing for this or that position. He is not so easily categorized. His position often is to be positionless. Having said that, it is possible to locate Farmer within that broad band of thinkers who have taken a linguistic turn. Farmer terms this the method of *reflexive interpretation*.

Theorists who have been convinced of the fundamental importance of language have three things in common. First, they reject a realist metaphysics. That is, there is no knowable independent reality that somehow founds a language. There is not first a reality of material things to which words refer on a one-to-one basis. Second, this means that language virtually constructs the social, public world that humans share. As Farmer puts it we are "trapped within the conceptual cobweb of language" (p. 23). Or, quoting Wittgenstein, "the limits of my language are the limits of my world" (p. 24). Third, thinkers who affirm the

primacy of language will tend toward relativism and skepticism. Languages differ, and in those differences dissimilar and non-exclusive realities are socially constructed. Truth, then, is relative to the language that creates it. Further, since no particular language can claim universality or exclusive privilege, skepticism is the most appropriate attitude about truth claims. Although not the only road to inclusion in the category *postmodern*, it is the most well traveled. Farmer, it follows, qualifies as a postmodernist.

The title of this book, *The Language of Public Administration*, follows from Farmer's linguistic turn. It would, however, have been more accurate to make *language* plural. Indeed, each chapter may be regarded as the exploration of the way one or more languages constructs its own world. It is in this respect that two disagreements between Farmer and this reviewer can be teased out.

First, there seems to be a linguistic determinism only barely hidden behind explications of the linguistic turn. If we are indeed "trapped within the conceptual cobweb of language," how can new thoughts occur? It is almost as if a language thinks us. I would suggest that those committed to the linguistic turn consider ways that this residual Levi-Straussian structuralism can be transcended. One way is to highlight the distinction between used language (the storehouse of concepts available to a speaker, which does indeed limit and channel speech, writing, and thought) and language-in-use (the creative taking up of a linguistic tradition in new combinations). Another, favored by this reviewer, is to consider that perception is even more fundamental than language. Language, of course, strongly influences what is perceived, but some perception seems, at least to me, to be independent of language: cravings, hunger, smell, touch, background sounds. Another example of what is inexplicable by the linguistic turn is conceptual thinking. Perhaps it is a fantasy, but the way I experience conceptual thinking is as a kind of a flash like lightning across a darkened sky. Then I hold this flash in suspension while searching for words to express it. Flash first, language second.

The second issue I would like to raise with Farmer has to do with the problem of multiple languages. Put in ancient premodern philosophical language it is the problem of the one and the many. Is language one or are their multiplicities of them? Farmer can be read as one who affirms multiplicities, while Noam Chomsky and some structuralists affirm a universal grammar implanted in human brains. To embrace multiple languages seems to entail denying privileged status to any of them. If one

cannot distinguish between better and worse languages, if the languages determine the reality seen, how could I judge, as I very much want to do, Farmer's book as being better than most others? I suggest that a fruitful line of inquiry, still well within the relativist camp, might be to valorize the empathetic indwelling in as many languages as can be accomplished. In such a way we can pronounce Farmer's multiple indwellings wiser than those trapped in narrower paradigms.

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REFERENCE

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Performance Measurement

Arie Halachmi and Geert Bouckaert, eds. 1996. *Organizational Performance and Measurement in the Public Sector: Toward Service, Effort and Accomplishment Reporting*. Westport, Conn.: Quorum Books, 347 pp.

In bringing together the chapters for this work, editors Halachmi and Bouckaert indicate their purpose is to ". . . help managers develop a better understanding of both the overt and covert parts of performance measurement systems" (p. 2). Not only is this a lofty and an ambitious goal, it suggests an element of intrigue associated with what is perhaps more often found to be a rather mundane topic. The reader is led to suspect that just beyond the normal purview lies a key to understanding the typically much publicized, highly rationalized performance measurement endeavor found in public organizations. One is impelled to reach out and grasp this new knowledge.

Organizational Performance and Measurement in the Public Sector: Toward Service, Effort and Accomplishment Reporting is divided into four major divisions: "The Challenge," "Service Efforts and Accomplishment Reporting," "Performance Measurement in Context," and "Performance Measurement: International