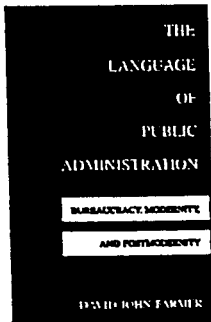


Postmodernism and Public Administration's Identity Crisis

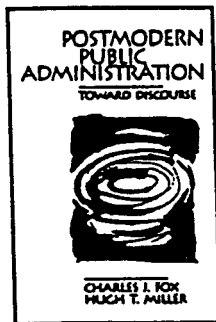
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David John Farmer, *The Language of Public Administration: Bureaucracy, Modernity and Postmodernity* (University of Alabama Press, 1995) 314 pp. \$29.95 paper.

Charles F. Fox and Hugh T. Miller, *Postmodern Public Administration: Toward Discourse* (Sage Publications, 1994) 192 pp. \$42 cloth. \$18.50 paper.

While the external legitimacy problem — the question of how to theorize bureaucracy as a legitimate part of democracy — has occupied the greatest attention of the public administration theory community during the past several years, it is the internal legitimacy problem — the difficulty of finding an identity acceptable to all associated with the field — that is the more serious issue. Perhaps, in fact, resolving the identity issue is the key to solving the problem of bureaucracy in a democracy. The question of intellectual identity is a grave one in public administration because it has taken a form that evokes the question of intellectual commitment itself. Indeed, one can characterize public administration as afflicted with an anti-intellectualism that,



despite some positive aspects, functions as a pernicious drain on the field.

On the positive side, the field's resistance to abandoning its origins as a social movement oriented toward practicality and becoming instead an enterprise oriented purely toward research and theory is among its most noble aspects. It is the primary reason that I, for one, choose to identify myself with it. Epithets like "manhole cover counters" and "nuts and bolts experts" strike me as badges of honor when I consider that what they refer to is the field's willingness to be concerned with the quality of the vitally important, mundane affairs of governance. In this sense, public administration's anti-intellectualism is a strength and the anchor of its identity.

The commitment to the practical can, though, be carried to an extreme at which it becomes highly negative. It becomes an anti-intellectualism that is, I think, of a distinctively American variety, marked by an earthy insistence on the primacy of materiality and the body. In the case of public administration, it produces (even among some of the field's more rarified theorists) a hard-core mistrust of all abstractions that do not pay homage to the

immediacy of physical experience. This attitude is grounded in the opposition of life and death and its corollary, pleasure and pain. Within the frame set by these categories, the primacy of material necessity is simply axiomatic. Given this axiom, all "subjectivist" orientations, grounded as they are in interpretation, can only be considered, "helpful in adding perspective" or "true up to a point." Thus, "in the final analysis," while one can debate whether a tree falling in the forest makes a sound if no one is present, in the case of a tree actually falling on someone's head, the situation is entirely different and somehow more "real." All considerations of interpretation must then be discounted as irrelevant to genuine questions of appropriate action (Stivers, 1995; Stillman, 1995).

This mode of thought ultimately results in questioning the relevance, utility, and validity of abstraction; it marks the dogged insistence on acknowledging the primacy of the taken-for-granted, "real" world as destructively anti-intellectual. Practitioners — and the academics who purport to represent them in academia — are often associated with this attitude and cast as merely "professional" and hence not truly committed to the intellectual enterprise of their field. As a result, complicated splits have developed. Academic theorists, many of whom work from various "subjectivist" stances, are stigmatized as being too abstract and thus irrelevant by practitioners and their academic allies. Ironically, these same academic theorists, many if not all of whom are actually quite committed to the field's practical concerns, are further stigmatized by their colleagues in the traditional university disciplines as insufficiently intellectual by virtue of their association with the world of practice.

I place myself squarely in the midst of this hodgepodge of positions. As one who has had a career as a public administration practitioner and who currently practices as a professional in the applied field of organi-

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zation development, I side with practitioners on the question of whether theory should strive to be useful and relevant to practice. On the other hand, as a theorist who works from the stance of subjectivist or interpretivist theories, I refuse to discount the relevance and utility of such abstraction for the world of practice or to regard such theories as merely interesting foils or challenges to more orthodox points of view. In other words, I believe that all varieties of theory have great significance for practice, and I refuse to compromise the intellectual integrity of theoretical work.

As the foregoing discussion indicates, the lack of a clear intellectual identity — a clear sense of the potentials and limits of theory — creates the crisscrossing splits in public administration: practitioner versus academic; practical academic versus theoretical academic; positive academic theorist versus subjectivist academic theorist; the field of public administration as a whole versus the traditional disciplines. We desperately need perspectives that can help heal these splits. The two books under review here provide just such a perspective, in two complementary versions.

David Farmer's *Language of Public Administration*

This is a truly important book for the field of public administration in the United States. On its back cover, William Stewart is quoted as saying that "this study is an encouraging example of the kind of intellectual discourse that is so much needed at present," and George Frederickson calls the book "an excellent example of the extent to which modern and postmodern public administrationists are considerably more philosophical than much of the rest of the social sciences." I think that Stewart's statement is much closer to the mark than is Frederickson's generous assessment. If I may offer my limited and humble opinion, the field of public administration does not utilize philosophy as much as it needs to. The way to remedy this deficiency is to acknowledge it, thereby disposing ourselves (I would hope) to be attentive to books like this one. I consider it to be one of the more broadly philosophical works ever aimed specifically at an American public administration audience.

The present "postmodern moment"

gives us a distinctive opportunity to assess the intellectual foundations of our field, and Farmer is in an excellent position to help us find a frame for such an assessment. While he has two Ph.D. degrees—one in economics from the University of London and one in philosophy from the University of Virginia—he also has a career as a public administration practitioner, most notably as special assistant to the Police Commissioner of New York City and then as a division director in the National Institute of Justice at the U.S. Justice Department. He is, in the truest sense, what Dwight Waldo called a "pracademic," a highly educated, philosophically sophisticated, public administration intellectual who has had practical experience. He embodies the integration of theory and practice and thus the healing of the splits I have described. He is in the best possible position for intellectually ministering to the rest of us.

The Project of the Book

The aim of Farmer's book is appropriately bold. He wants to alter the field of public administration rather profoundly: "a radical change is needed in the way we conceptualize the role and nature of public administration theory" (Farmer, 4). He sets up the project, as indicated by the title (which was, by the way, the only thing that I really did not like about his book), by defining public administration as a language. In doing so, he grounds his approach in Wittgenstein's notion of language as a form of life and establishes the fundamental premise that in order to change the field, we, as public administrationists, must alter the language game we are playing. This is a powerful strategy, and one that many of us in the field of organizational development have seen work first hand.

Farmer defines the public administration language as its *arrangement of information* and believes that reordering this arrangement is the key to change. In this, he is seeking a practical result, "more satisfactory answers to concerns...about the nature, size, scope, and functioning of public bureaucracy" (Farmer, 3).

However, achieving fundamental change in the field does not mean rejecting everything from the past. This book is not a polemic, nor is it a critique in the usual sense of the term. What Farmer does is reveal the inherent, inevitable limitations of

the modernist framework. This is not to discount modernism's achievements but rather to recognize its logical limits. He then explores postmodernism's potential "to take thinking about public administration beyond the limits imposed by the modernist mind-set" (Farmer, 245). This delicate balancing of modernism with postmodernism brings us to one of the book's most distinctive aspects.

The Structure of the Argument

The book is divided into two main parts, one treating public administration in the mode of modernity and the other dealing with it in the mode of postmodernity. The two parts are designed to be symmetrical in that each discusses the contributions and limits of public administration considered in the two modes. The chapters on modernity are tilted toward the critical; the chapters on postmodernity are more positive, emphasizing potentials or contributions. I found this appropriate, since modernity is the standing orthodoxy, and postmodernity is the distal perspective.

The book's distinctiveness though, lies not so much in its format as in what might be called the code or logic of its argumentation. Farmer labels his approach "the art [of] reflexive interpretation." He describes its point this way: "Reflexive interpretation is concerned with why we see (understand) what we are seeing (understanding) and with the possibilities for seeing (understanding) something different by changing the lens" (Farmer, 13). Reflexivity is not new in public administration, of course, but Farmer adds a noteworthy aspect when he defines it as "a process of playful and attuned dialog with the underlying content of the language" (Farmer, 12). When I encountered this method applied in the body of the analysis, the heart of it struck me as a variant of the Kantian methodology of contraries (a term Farmer employs), in which two opposing assertions are both rendered contingent. As I recall, Kant's pungent example of how such critique works involved the assertions "Bodies smell bad" versus "Bodies smell good." One statement is revealed not to be a contradiction of the other when we consider that the underlying assumption that bodies smell at all might be brought into question. This is also one of Derrida's main tactics of deconstruction—isolating the key binary

opposition of a text and then moving to a deeper level of analysis that brings both terms of the opposition into question.

Farmer's purpose is not to deconstruct, however. He does not wish to render modernist public administration completely contingent. Rather, he is "playful" with his method and "attuned" to it; as a result, he creates a tone of critically reflective appreciation. The effect is to soften the orthodoxies of modernist public administration and to add substance to the potentials of a postmodern public administration, so that both can be discussed at the same time, in the same place, with the same breath. Nothing in either position is destroyed or even rejected but rather put into perspective. His reflexive interpretation is intended to be compatible with, indeed to evoke, further exploration leading to a continuing process of sublation. In my view, he is successful, and to call his method "art" is not hyperbole.

Highlights of the Analysis

I am not going to summarize the book, since its own introduction describes it quite accurately, and each chapter ends with an exceptionally descriptive summary. A quick browse through these will give the potential reader a precise picture of the book's contents. Consequently, I shall highlight the aspects of each section that I particularly liked.

In the section on modernism, the chapters on particularism, scientism, and enterprise stand out. In his treatment of particularism, Farmer shows how our field has been limited by several restrictions in the selection of our subject matter. We have confined ourselves mainly to the American arena, to a narrow, rigid analytical separation between public and private life, and to the functional concerns of government. On these points the author's discourse is subtle, but, curiously, the effect is that of a startling wake-up call. For example, he cites sources indicating that the entire body of thought created by American public administration during the first half of its history had already been written and published in France by 1859, a century earlier.

His treatment of scientism is rather the reverse. In this chapter, he reviews the familiar literature on the philosophy of science that documents how positive science has been rendered thoroughly problematic

by the "scientific" attitude. He goes on to show how the same fate befell the ethical enterprise as it developed in public administration. In my view, most people in our field—even the ones who know this line of criticism thoroughly—proceed in our work as if none of this had ever happened. In reading these familiar stories I thought, maybe, at last, hearing this from a theorist who has been a practitioner will make people consider more seriously its implications for what we do.

The chapter on the limits of enterprise shows Farmer's method especially well. Of course, economics has traditionally been the natural enemy of public administration, and discussions of it have typically been singlemindedly critical. Farmer, himself trained as an economist, takes a different view: "Public choice economics", he says, "has produced useful results for public administration" (127). Nonetheless, he insists that a public administration that employs economic theory as its sole inspiration will crash into the same conceptual traps and dead ends that afflict economics. What is distinctive about Farmer's presentation of this familiar controversy is the texture of the discourse itself.

In the section on postmodernism, Farmer discusses four aspects—imaginization, deconstruction, deterritorialization, and alterity. I was most gratified to see that his analysis does not repeat the cliché of charging postmodernism with nihilism. Instead, he presents a considered inventory of how the deconstructivist attitude can play a positive role in public administration, while at the same time pointing out its problems in doing so. The highlight of this section for me came toward the end of the book, in Farmer's discussion of what he calls "alterity"—the question of how, lacking the efficiency standard (which falls within the contraries of modernity), administrators should behave toward others. The book's most exciting aspect was the powerful rhetorical flourish achieved in this penultimate chapter. In my own work in the arena of postmodernism, studying the thought of Jacques Lacan, I have come to understand ever more deeply that the most profound problem we face in public administration is coming to terms with the tendencies toward sadistic behavior that, according to the Lacanian view, attach to the use of institutional authority. Farmer

starts his discussion of the problem of alterity at almost the same place, though with Foucault rather than Lacan. Specifically, he enjoins us to come to terms with the "fascism in us all" (Farmer, 228). He offers "antiadministration" as the concept that summarizes what postmodernism implies for public administration: antifascism, openness, diversity, rejection of metanarratives, and opposition to established institutions and practices of justice. In his view postmodernism, with all its difficulties, does suggest the possibility that the morality of dealing with the other, even when this morality is left uncodified, can provide a stable, valid point of reference for questioning administration, at the same time that we are carrying it out. "In such a way," he says, "it may be possible to develop an antiprogram and an antiinstitutional attitude while still providing services" (Farmer, 243).

Though he chooses to leave it implicit, this last point captures precisely the central lesson of Farmer's analysis: We in public administration must learn to embrace paradox, to let contradiction stand, and to stop insisting on the singular truths that one-dimensional rationalism promises but never quite provides. By this same lesson, Farmer teaches us that rationalism must also be embraced. It is only the promise of singular truth that must be denied. To return to our starting point, the key to achieving this is the language we use.

The Style of the Discourse

This book is a preeminent example of the dictum that the medium is the message. Instead of merely prescribing, Farmer self-consciously *does* what he says should be done. By applying his lesson to himself, he avoids the favorite jibe of academic critics—that one is employing or prescribing the opposite of what one is, in fact, doing. For just this reason, though, many American readers may be put off by the style of the discourse, which takes away the defenses we usually raise to avoid being touched by proposals for change.

In an academic book like this, one expects either of two styles that together constitute a Scylla and Charybdis dilemma—at least in my view, since I like neither of them. One of these is a style of argument that is thematic and clear to the point of being polemical. This is a likable style

use it is easy to follow and allows the reader to categorize the writer and dispatch readily into a camp—friend or foe. The other is the style of “scholarly activity,” in which the argument is so qualified and hedged, so rich in circumlocutions, that it creates a kind of rococo discourse. If one is able to follow it at all, it makes a sensation similar to (as the old joke says) “kissing your sister.” There is nothing wrong with it, but it does not get you anywhere either.

Farmer's discourse uses neither of these styles. He rejects the alternative of polemical clarity, but at the same time his writing is strongly thematic and tightly structured. It seems to blend three types of intellectual writing: American (because it is thematic, organized, and clear, and it presents its analysis as a “discovery” or a test of a hypothesis); British (it is salted with sharp analytical insights, pointed judgments, and provocative questions); and French (its analytic formality is coupled with a lack of pretense and an invitation to become involved in the discourse for its own sake). This hybrid style may put off some readers, but I would suggest that a bit of patience with it and openness toward it will be well rewarded. After all, the book is challenging the public administration community to broaden itself beyond the American parochialism that has traditionally afflicted it.

This style creates a distinctive kind of engagement: It evokes a new language. Instead of hectoring for change, Farmer claims that his study “shows how the post-modern perspective *permits* a revolution” (Farmer, ix, emphasis added). It uses the passive voice heavily: “It is suggested that the public administrator can seek to decanonize her practice” (234). At the same time, it captures the reader's attention with philosophical judgments: “Physical reality, as it is in itself, is beyond our seeing” (18) and engagingly direct observations: “Openness to others requires not only changes in the bureaucracy but also changes in society” (238). Farmer's style, which is thematic and organized but not polemic, subtle but occasionally vivid, definite but inviting response, has the effect of opening a space and a dialogic connection that is quietly exciting. One has the sense that “we can get somewhere with this; the text is not afraid to state a point of view but wants to

hear something back; I can learn from it, and I have the opportunity to teach what I know; a positive change or development is possible if we start talking like this.” This sense led me to say earlier that this is the sort of book that can help heal the many splits that afflict our field. It can start a dialog between those who want to talk about the stark “reality” of trees falling on heads and those who regard such lines as facile quips.

T.S. Eliot held the view that reading was a process of people's allowing texts to seduce them and then recovering from the seduction (Scholes, 1989). This book carries out a kind of seduction, but it is a seduction into valid relationship rather than exploitation. The reader is asked to participate in building a new public administration world by adopting the language that the author presents. Recovery in the sense that Eliot meant it is neither appropriate nor necessary. Curiously, though, this aspect will make the book more appealing—even as philosophical as it is—to educated, reflective practitioners (people like Farmer) than to traditional academics. At least as I have come to know them, academics are not people of great emotional flexibility. They do not wish to allow themselves to be seduced. They want argument to be cast in their terms, i.e., conventional or traditional terms, so that they can employ their standard defensive tools of critique and assessment. In this sense, the core of Farmer's argument that the language of public administration can be changed is anathema. The language of the field is the last thing that academics want to change. This is precisely what they are in charge of, and it is this power that allows them to monitor the degree and direction of every sort of change in the field.

As a process theorist (following Mary Parker Follett) and organizational change practitioner, I am quite familiar with this dilemma. Although I have sometimes attempted to challenge and revise the discourse itself, I have also sought to engage the traditional mode of discourse, the traditional language of the field, on its own terms. This meant casting myself in the seemingly impossible, contradictory role of stating a new set of rules for discourse (process rules) that would effectively render discourse unbound or rule free (White in

Wamsley *et al.*, 1990). While I believe that this is, technically speaking, philosophically possible, at the practical level it is ineffectual. One really cannot create change by talking about it; one must find a way of *doing it*. This is what Farmer has done, and why I admire this book so greatly. Before coming to a summary assessment of it, however, I wish to use my remarks about the dilemma of process theory as a bridge to a discussion of another book that seeks to bring public administration into the postmodern era.

Fox and Miller's *Postmodern Public Administration*

Charles Goodsell writes in his enthusiastic foreword to this book that he has “every reason to hate the book. Yet I love it!” (Fox and Miller, ix) This comment probably sets the frame for reactions to this book. The intensity and summary valence of the responses to it will no doubt vary, but I think that most readers will feel a certain amount of ambivalence. Considering the book's purpose, this reaction will mark it as a resounding success. Fox and Miller, theorists who have knowledge of and respect and concern for the world of the public administration practitioner, are well aware of the pernicious splits in the field that I described earlier. Their purpose in this book is to suture them by redefining the field's central concern as discourse rather than expertise or technique. Such a project necessarily entails going a few sacred oxen, but the authors do this in such a way that, despite the distress involved, the reader “loves it” and is intrigued.

The Project of the Book

Fox and Miller's approach is to finesse the conceptual problems that beset the field. For example, they say that they are not interested in the “legitimacy issue,” since it boils down to whether or not what public administrators do is accepted. These authors belong to the tradition of those who have sought to theorize public administration out of its conceptual box as a rational, technical, bureaucratic enterprise by defining it as a distinctive way of relating to and mobilizing people in the process of governance. “We”, they explain, “are less concerned with legitimacy and more concerned with policy. We write against the backdrop of this more important question:

What should we do next?" (Fox and Miller, 4) Of course, this tradition must contend with the admitted failure of the "participation movement," which reached its zenith with the Great Society programs and shortly after foundered on the apparent impossibility of "making participation work." Given this failure, how does one rethink public administration out of the bureaucracy trap?

What seems called for is, first, an effective critique of the status quo and, second, a way of conceptualizing the microdynamics of human dialogue that offers a practical alternative to rational, technocratic policy and implementation decision making. Few have taken on these daunting tasks. Fred Thayer has contributed significantly to the needed critique, but the field's sometimes hostile reception to his attacks on hierarchy and its corollary, competition, indicate the difficulties and risks that one must hazard when challenging the field to change (Thayer, 1981). As a process theorist, I have at times pursued the task from the other side, seeking to share what I have learned from the theory and practice of applied organizational change about how we might rethink the matter of people interacting in the arenas of policy making and administrative implementation. I must say that I consider my efforts to be unsuccessful. Except for some graduate students and other specialists in organization development, within the broader field of public administration, I have found little inclination for understanding what process theory is about and how it applies to public administrative institutions.

My own lack of success makes me admire all the more what Fox and Miller have achieved. Much of their genius lies in their choice of approach. My approach was essentially psychological and more or less ignored the political dimension of governance. By contrast, Fox and Miller are essentially philosophical in building their theory of dialogue, only touching on psychological concerns where they overlap with philosophical concepts — especially as they sometimes do in phenomenology. Further, they are concerned with theorizing social relationships even, it seems, to the point of offering a revision of politics itself. All of this is captured well in the key term in their analysis — discourse. Public administration, they argue, should shift its

central focus to the question of how a certain kind of productive discourse can be established among the people involved in governance. Generally speaking, this book is an instance of the burgeoning interest in civil society.

The Structure of the Argument

The book's argument is straightforward. It begins with critique: The current system or orthodoxy, which Fox and Miller term the "loop model of democracy" (citizens start the loop by identifying and politically expressing what they want; these demands proceed through government; public administrators close the loop by servicing the demands and having their efforts evaluated by citizens) is bankrupt. Strenuous efforts to maintain the credibility of the loop model, mainly by increasing moral pressure (the ethics in government evangelism and the blaming the bureaucrats emotionalism), have proved no more than quixotic. The model has so deteriorated that it now lacks even face validity with growing numbers of citizens.

The most serious alternatives to the loop model, i.e., attempts to respond to its failure by finding new grounds for legitimizing governance, are participative communitarianism and the constitutionalism or neoinstitutionalism of the "refounding movement" that emanated from the Center for Public Administration and Policy at Virginia Tech University. Fox and Miller deem John Rohr's work to be the cornerstone of the Virginia Tech "Blacksburg Manifesto," and they take on Rohr's position specifically, ultimately dismissing it as "arcane constitutional scholarship" and a "weak attempt to legitimate the administrative state" (Fox and Miller, 6). They also set aside communitarianism, or legitimacy achieved through direct involvement with citizens. Whereas the Blacksburg approach is considered impractical because it fails to convince theoretically, communitarianism is deemed impracticable by reason of human nature and the human situation. It is impossible to implement. From these failed possibilities we are to turn (of course) to the discourse theory set out in their book.

I thoroughly enjoyed these critiques. Although I have been identified with both of the approaches Fox and Miller reject, I have always had a standing disagreement

with aspects of both communitarianism and the Blacksburg Manifesto—though more with the emphasis on the agency perspective than with Rohr's constitutionalism. However, for me the highlight of the book is in Chapter 3, where a description of "postmodern symbolic politics" is set out. Of all the descriptions of the postmodern condition I have encountered, this, per unit of space used, is absolutely one of the best. I was gratified to see it made so visible to the public administration community because I think many in the field tend to dismiss the idea of the postmodern condition as a pop culture vogue and so refuse to read about it. This assessment will, I think, be thoroughly shaken by a look at the picture that Fox and Miller draw.

The discourse theory alternative is set out in the book's second part. The authors begin with a foundation in phenomenology and its corollary epistemology, constructivism, building specifically out of the work of Anthony Giddens' structuration theory. This allows them to adopt a probabilistic view of human behavior and to deconstruct, or at least soften, the dominant image of bureaucracies as reified, "given," institutions. They offer a metaphor of the public sphere as an "energy field" where policy making is not rational analysis but a process of "capturing meaning" (Fox and Miller, 106-107).

Against this backdrop, the issue of how to democratize discussion within the energy field is revealed as the heart of the matter. Here Fox and Miller draw on Habermas' theory of authentic speech acts and Arendt's idea of agnostic tension (there must be argument and struggle). Following these theorists, they propose that discourse must be sincere, intended to be relevant to the situation, characterized by willing (noncoerced, nonapathetic) attention, and must involve participants who are willing and able to make a substantive contribution (no free riders or fools allowed). These are what they call *warrants for discourse*, freely available to all. The idea seems to be that if involvement in policy making follows these guidelines or rules, it will, perforce, constitute legitimate governance through discursive democracy.

In the book's final chapter, Fox and Miller use their model of discourse as a conceptual tool for assessing the efficacy of

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social bond from which all social order and well-being emanate.

an array of real-world programs designed to employ discourse in governance. Their case analysis ranges from instances of elite-dominated manipulation at one extreme to expressionistic anarchy at the other. While they judge both these forms of participation to be democratic dead ends, they find hope or "intimations" in a few cases—for example, bioethical health decisions in Oregon, the Phoenix Futures Forum, the neighborhood health-care program studied by Cam Stivers—that discourse of the kind their model prescribes is possible. These projects had problems, but they also show possibilities. Such "nascent" forms of authentic discourse suggest that where democratic process approximates the outlines of their model, it begins to achieve the structuration and coherence required of efficacious democratic discourse. As a final note, Fox and Miller prescribe a proactive role for public administration, whereby each administrator would capitalize on every opportunity to reach public action through a process of agonistic discourse with citizens. The key to administrators being able to achieve a proactive stance is that they must learn to listen, which is, of course, the core of the inclusiveness that their idea of discourse seeks.

Highlights of the Analysis

I mentioned that I found the critiques of the Blacksburg Manifesto and of communitarianism to be especially engaging and that the book's description of the post-modern political condition is one of the most cogent and gripping I have encountered. These were great highlights. The standout feature of the book, though, is the general integrity of its argument. I have used this book as a supplementary text in two of my graduate courses. While my students (most of whom had minimal exposure to philosophy of the sort employed in the book) often found the philosophical concepts and argumentation to be difficult, they were, nonetheless, thoroughly engaged

and followed the argument well. I disagree with the suggestion that this book is thin on practical proposals. I came away from it, and certainly from my discussions of it with students, with a vividly clear idea of what these authors were arguing. In this respect, it is a great book for fostering the very productive discourse that it advocates.

One aspect of the contribution it makes to our field is that it provides a model for the type of argument that can be clearly engaged. The authors show us where they stand from the beginning, openly declaring their commitments and prejudices. This fosters understanding and helps their audience identify and organize a focused, coherent response. Much academic writing results in writers and readers talking past one another, and this is one important reason why our intellectual center of gravity has tended to stay so solidly in the same place. This book argues authentically for a major change in public administration's identity; in that sense, it meets its own standard of legitimacy and efficacy. It should be welcomed as a model of the kind of scholarly communication that is especially needed in our field.

The Style of the Discourse

In the introduction to this review I remarked that the two books to be discussed represent complementary approaches to healing the intellectual splits in our field. I believe that Farmer's book will speak best to students and academics interested in public administration theory and to educated, reflective practitioners. His message comes across as preeminently about *administration*. Fox and Miller speak more broadly, to my ear at least, to those inclined toward political science and political philosophy, whose primary concern is *policy formation* in a democratic society. Of course, as foci for analysis, these two sets of interests largely overlap, but they are embodied separately in the people who actually pursue them in their work. I

would think, then, that the style used by Fox and Miller will engage those on both sides of the split between practical academics and theoretical academics, and the split between positive theorists and subjectivist theorists. Readers in the traditional disciplines will also find much to engage them in this book; it casts public administration in a light that makes it relevant to a wide array of deeply held social concerns. As a self-perceived ally of the project that Fox and Miller are pursuing, but one who employs a different style, I applaud their accomplishment in constructing an argument that is so engaging across so many intellectual boundaries.

Conclusion

I would like to place both of these books in a summary perspective, one that acknowledges explicitly the biases that I bring to them. These books will be the cornerstones of what I think will be a quickly burgeoning literature of post-modern public administration. Therefore, it is appropriate to set them against the backdrop formed by the social conditions of the post moment in which we are living. The singular mark of this historical moment is the atrophy of the regulative social bond from which all social order and well-being emanate. This bond must be continually regenerated and nurtured, a fact that most political and economic conceptions of social order either overlook or forget. The dominant perspectives seem to *assume* the social bond, as if there existed a natural symbiotic network to provide a permanent foundation for society. According to these conceptions, the key problem for social theory is how to contain and maximize the behavior that occurs within the boundaries of this social bond—how, in other words, to keep society from tearing itself apart as individuals encounter one another within the social arena. Attaining optimal social well-being is a corollary concern. The scenario of postmodern society is teaching us how incorrect this view is. We are being reminded that maintaining the bond itself is the generic issue, and that the violence that ensues when it fails is far more destructive than the violence produced by economic and political rivalry.

I have already said that I am a process theorist. The subject of process theory is precisely the matter of regenerating and

maintaining the regulative social bond. It sees the issue of nurturing this bond quite starkly. The questions involved are how to create *contact* among people and how to remove blocks to contact. Contact is a term drawn from Gestalt psychology to indicate a special genuineness in the texture of relationship. When it is present, disputes can be negotiated, conflicts settled, work cooperatively achieved. As a shorthand, real world illustration of it, I can point to the work of the Common Ground Network for Life and Choice, a group that seeks to facilitate mutual understanding between the opponents and proponents of abortion. Process theory in general seeks just such a goal: finding ways that people can come to terms with the deepest issues that separate them, in order to live together in mutual understanding and acceptance.

Process theory sees, at least at the present moment, that the primary obstacle to achieving effective process is a quite specific "attitude kernel" that people bring to their encounters with others. This can be designated as the "I know" attitude. Its most pernicious version is "I know and you don't" (common across gender lines), but this attitude to any degree is anathema to process and distorts every transaction in a relationship. I am not speaking here simply of arrogance or an attitude of condescension toward perceived ignorance. All that is required to produce the "I know" attitude is the belief that there is a Reality from which Truth can be wrested. This belief configures the slippery slope down which those who disagree with conventional orthodoxy (defined, however beneficently, by those "who know") slide into the category of people who deny reality, are softheaded, or are otherwise unworthy of being acknowledged.

This brings us back to the issue of public administration's anti-intellectualism, raised at the beginning of this review. The "I know" attitude is produced by the anti-intellectualism of certainty. The splits that beset the field of public administration are divisions between those who hold feelings of certainty and those who hold feelings of doubt. To heal these splits, we must find a way of talking that covers them over with common ground, that resolves certainty and doubt into productive dialogue.

Both of the books under review here offer models of how to achieve such dia-

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logue, images of how people can relate effectively to settle their common fate in the arena of administration and policy making. The question that I must ask, though, is how much each of them contributes to breaking the pernicious attitude kernel, the generic block to process.

Let us begin with Fox and Miller. It should be clear that they are allies of the process theory project. They have defined the problem to be addressed in process theory terms. According to their critique, the loop model of democratic politics cannot maintain the social order. Attempts to fix it by tacking on external controls that merely emanate moral pressure will not work. Rather, the issue lies with the dynamics of interaction itself. To my mind, this is precisely correct. The solution that they propose, the model of discourse that they construct, also goes far in the right direction. Their warrants for discourse seem conducive to contact. Following Habermas, one of their inspirations for proper understanding of human communication, they show great concern for the genuineness of interaction.

The strength of this approach is its ability to draw people (especially some theorists averse to it) into discussing the dynamics of social interaction, when they otherwise would only be willing to talk in the terms of power politics or policy making. However, this strength is also the book's greatest weakness. It is too conservative, too unradical, to address the postmodern condition. It gives away too much to modernism's belief in stable knowledge and caters too much to the demand that alternatives for change be concretely specified. Fox and Miller do not acknowledge that their specification of warrants for discourse is itself simply a source of conflicting interpretations that can only be settled on common ground of the kind that the warrants are designed to create. This, of course, is the central dilemma of modernism, and the reason why it has pro-

duced so much relativism and so little actual change in social process.

The charge most likely to be raised against this book by those interested in postmodernism is that it is not postmodern at all. To the extent that it is grounded in and reflects high modernist thinkers like Habermas (an archenemy of post-modernism), and plays to the modernist demand for specified answers, this charge is correct. On the other hand, it draws attention, from an explicitly constructivist epistemology, to the problematic nature of process as an aspect of public administration. It is supremely postmodern in the sense that it is at the cutting edge of the current modernist literature and pushes it into new territory. This accomplishment cannot be denied or taken away.

David Farmer's essay comes closer to hitting the target that process theory sets up, the "I know" attitude. He creates common ground between him and the reader in the very way that he expresses the dialogue of the book. His approach relies on subtlety and finesse. He draws little attention to the problematic facts of the postmodern condition, and he balances his critique of modernism with an appreciation of its accomplishments. His essay is a model of narrative civility and the sense of inclusive acceptance that it can create. He shows a certain genius in the way he configures structure around the discourse without specifying the necessity for it, i.e., for modernist rules or guidelines. He shows us how a reflexive attitude toward the possibilities for knowing creates common ground. In this respect he also must be counted as a close ally and partner in the process theory project. He offers one answer to its critical question of how to provide structure without having to ground it in Truth and authority.

However, this approach has a definite limit, one which is frequently raised as an objection to every approach that does not rely on authoritative structure. This is the

problem of extremism—of people who enter the process holding positions laden with such heavy emotion or commitment that it is difficult for them to acknowledge the norms of civil discourse. Under the conditions of late modernism, extremists are not the only ones who are extreme. The reconfiguration of political sentiment now occurring in the U.S. is testimony to this. People are increasingly feeling lost and confused, and the natural reaction is to adopt extreme attitudes and extreme talk. I fear that Farmer's idea of reflexive interpretation would falter when confronted with this increasingly prevalent reality.

He demands that we begin with the realization that every line of truth has a contrary, and this is in the very nature of truth itself. He educates us beautifully to his idea, but many will not be open to the lesson because they will find that process implies a balance which they cannot accept because it does not match their sense of desperation. The problem is that, while the kind of discourse prescribed here sets an ethos of "we can know," it accomplishes this by transforming the "I know" attitude from principle to embodied style. Socrates did much the same thing, which I think is why he is often interpreted as already knowing what he worked to evoke from his interlocutors. There are more and more viewpoints that are not reachable by the

kind of civilized dialogue that Farmer models.

Of course, there may not be any specific approach which answers the question of how to achieve dialogue that can lay common ground. I do feel fairly confident, though, that if such an approach exists, its source lies outside the purview of what we call the conscious mind. This is why process theory so strongly denies the "I know" attitude. The point of this denial is to contain the rational attitude of mind and oblige it to acknowledge the existence of something beyond it. This may suggest that the best metaphor for dialogue is the discourse of therapy, as alien and disagreeable as this might seem in the context of a field like public administration. If rationalism is failing us, though, it may be time to accept that our discourse must begin to encompass alternative elements or at least use them as an inspiration. The unconscious, after all, is the real force that creates common ground and begins to move impossible conflict situations toward resolution. Contact is essential to process only because it provides the opening to the unconscious.

These are two excellent books, groundbreaking books. I would like to ally myself with both of them, albeit for different reasons. Nonetheless, they do not go far enough for me. They stop short of draw-

ing the limits of the conscious attitude vividly enough to open the door to the real force outside it. I hope, then, that the next step in the evolution of Fox and Miller's discourse and David Farmer's reflexive interpretation is in this direction.

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