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Paradigmatic and Ontological Tensions in U.S. Public Administration

David John Farmer, Public Administration in Perspective: Theory and Practice through Multiple Lenses *(Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2010). 259 pp. $39.95 (paper), ISBN: 9780765623461.*

Editor's Note: Sadly, during publication PAR's editors learned of the author's passing. Alexander Kouzmin will be missed in the world of public administration. We offer our deepest sympathy to his family, friends, and colleagues.

Public Administration should increase its recognition of the deleterious effects of unconscious rhetoric in our language and way of thinking …It should increase its appreciation for the relevance of psychoanalytic understandings, which are currently pursued on public administration's circumference. It should indulge in the play of analysis.

Public Administration and planning should include focusing on overcoming false assumptions, even if the unveiling is unpleasant. It should do so even if the other disciplines don't. This requires some courage.

—David John Farmer, *Public Administration in Perspective*

Some of David John Farmer's considered reflections on U.S. public administration? Of course they are Farmer's, and there is more, much more. However, when was the last time one found "courage" to be a promotion selection criterion, a curriculum vitae entry item, or an ingredient in a job advertisement? Maybe at an American Society for Public Administration annual conference, "courage" occasionally may be manifested foolishly, even tolerably.

The purpose of Farmer's book is to be a public administration resource for "epistemic pluralism," a concept that refers to knowing through more than one way. The book examines theory and practice from 11 perspectives or lenses, including what Farmer characterizes as the enriching lens of traditional public administration. But, as any single lens is limiting, the other ten perspectives include less familiar but vitally and growingly important lenses such as neuroscience. The book aims to help readers with their own use of multiple perspectives, including a grand use (many perspectives) and a minimal use; it aims to be a resource and an example. The primary audience for the book is for teaching capstone and other courses in graduate programs in public administration. The other audience is those who have an interest in upgrading public administration thinking and practice. Farmer passionately believes that epistemic pluralism deserves the attention of those who are serious about more practical ideas in public administration.

Are there multiple lenses in American public administration, or is the array of perspectives better understood as a paradigmatic boundary of *permissible/tolerable* narratives and discourses within, and across, disciplines? Within the 11 perspectives that Farmer weaves together in a Socratic manner, there is courage and agency to be found, to be sure—intellectual courage, certainly, but agency almost by surrogacy. As this reviewer would frame the lenses as including traditional and business perspectives embedded in more conventional economic and political analysis; critical and poststructural narratives; psychoanalytic and neuroscientific evolutions; and, of course, feminist and ethical perspectives, epistemic pluralism is certainly on display. Part I of the book is a veritable guide, a mapping, indispensable to students and practitioners caught up in the neoliberal morass of the troika of neoclassical economics/public choice theory/New Public Management bedeviling contemporary, increasingly crisis-driven, criminally inclined neoliberal public affairs with their colluding political and financial elite behaviors (Johnston et al. 2010).

Together with part II, which synthesizes the various perspectives, one has the widest epistemological canvas (pluralism) of public administration discourse assembled for the interested reader. For this reviewer, part III

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represents the interesting possibility of a critical ontology within public administration, one that focuses on the ways in which public actors can be more creative and productive within the contradictory "disciplinary enclosures" of the public administration enterprise of the administrative state (Catlaw 2007, 151–54). Framing this review are two issues—prioritizing epistemological/paradigmatic understandings, and how the censorial academy debilitates the ontological/agentic possibilities in a subjugated public administration.

Framing or Cowering in U.S. Public Administration

To be sure, the political perspective has dominated the discourse on U.S. public administration.

> The identity crisis of self-aware public administration thinking has been discussed almost ad nauseam…. Wilson proposed a separation of politics and administration, making possible a generic science of PA that would aim at efficiency…. [This runs counter to the fact] that the politics–administration dichotomy does not reflect the reality of political–administrative life. (27)

Farmer is not the first to tackle mythology. Another call to arms and claims for preeminence of "The Public Administration" was argued in the Blacksburg Manifesto, a work and subsequent discourse about which Farmer is strangely silent.

> *The Public Administration needs to assert, but also to be granted, its propriety and legitimacy as an institution. It should assert the value of the Agency Perspective in effective functioning of the political system, the value and legitimacy of the Public Administrator as an actor in the governing process, and the distinctiveness and worth of his or her role—competence directed to the maintenance of: the Agency Perspective, the broadest possible understanding of public interest, and the constitutional governance process….*
>
> *It is time for us to advance the proposition that the popular will does not reside solely in elected officials but in a constitutional order that envisions a remarkable variety of legitimate titles to participate in governance. The Public Administration, created by statutes based on this constitutional order, holds one of these titles.* Its role, therefore, is not to cower before a sovereign legislative assembly or a sovereign elected executive. Our tradition and our constitution know no such sovereign. Rather, the task of The Public Administration is to share in governing wisely and well the constitutional order that the framers of the Constitution intended as an expression of the will of the people who alone are sovereign. (Wamsley et al. 1990, 43, 47; italics in original)

When will U.S. public administration discourse recognize its "fabricated" (Catlaw 2007) political ontology? The U.S. governance system is constitutionally founded on the *trinity* of governance menetypes encapsulated within Montesquieu's (1748) *trichotomous* doctrine of the *dynamic,* separation of powers. There would seem to be some validity, and integrity, in pursuing an analysis of U.S. constitutional governance, and the role of U.S. public administration, within the same cognitive framework and logic on which it was founded (Cutting and Kouzmin 2001, 2005, forthcoming).

As Farmer identifies, there has been much debate and equivocation over many years about the existence and nature of a politics–administration dichotomy, but clarifying the interrelationship has proved to be intractable (Catlaw 2007, 8; Cutting and Kouzmin 2005; Rainey 1990, 173; Waldo 1984a, 106; 1984b, 219ff; Wamsley et al. 1992, 60–61). This issue can be resolved only by moving outside the paradigm that has informed the study of public administration and governance in the United States since Wilson's (1887) first big step in the modern phase of the discipline. Put bluntly, there was/is no dichotomy—rather, it was/is a trichotomy. The politics–administration dichotomy should be really rethought as the politics–administration–entrepreneurship trichotomy. Put another way, public entrepreneurship has been neglected in the study of public administration in the same way that public administration has been neglected in the study of political science. Both are the *repressed shadow* of the main game in their respective field (Cutting and Kouzmin 2001, 2005, forthcoming).

The key insight is that public entrepreneurship has not been adequately differentiated and so has continued to muddy the essence of the differentiation between politics and administration by embellishing one or the other at different times or, perhaps, both of them together. That this aspect of entrepreneurship, or leadership, has not been adequately differentiated and given its proper worth is understandable when it is acknowledged that this trichotomy is, in fact, a trinity of governance *menetypes* (Cutting and Kouzmin 2001, 2005, forthcoming).

Following this possible paradigmatic shift in mainstream public administration thinking in the United States, another insight might be that Simon's (1947) fact–value dichotomy is just another slant on a particular aspect of the politics–administration dichotomy. In particular, the reverse order of naming the fact–value dichotomy suggests that the focus is on the process of cognitive reversion, or policy decision making, rather than on the process of cognitive procession or policy implementation (it is remembered that administration encapsulates both policy advice and policy implementation). It is then a small step to appreciate that Simon's fact–value dichotomy is actually better seen as the possibility–fact–value trichotomy and that,

moreover, it captures the trinity of menetypes about policy formulation and decision.

The lack of recognition/appreciation of trichotomous nuances in U.S. public administration has puzzled this reviewer for some considerable time. Hallowed turf is being messed with here, but with cognitive, blind spots, paradigmatic limitations, and an oversocialized, intellectual parochialism prevailing, perhaps "blind Freddy" does, indeed, exist and can inform.

Ontology/Agency in an Oversocialized Public Administration Academy

Within the "Academy," anonymous peer review is the "gold standard" of academic claims of profundity and legitimacy. But as anyone who has spent any time in academia knows, paradigm shifts in any academic "discipline" proceed much slower, and with much less clear substantiation, than would be expected from a pure reading of Kuhn's *Theory and Structure of Scientific Revolution* (1970; Kouzmin, Witt, and Thorne 2009, 356–57). The greater reality is Truss's (2005) role of safe, polite invisibility, avoiding the abusive incivility of colleagues and others that plays at the margins of the prevailing symbolic order and permits some light within the invisible "peer process" of establishing legitimated validity (Thorne and Kouzmin 2006).

Academia functions very much on the same unspoken premise as practice: dissent is permitted only to the extent that it falls within neatly circumscribed channels. Despite Farmer's clear support for contemplative intellectualism and playful theory (Farmer 1995, 2005), even radical, nonconformist academia exhibits the forms, structures, and standards of "appropriate," "professional," and "closed" discourse (Kouzmin, Witt, and Thorne 2009, 357). Peer review ratifies this process while mystifying its inner workings. Academic journals represent cliques of guardianship, policing self-anointed enclaves of ontology, epistemology, and political hegemonies. As Farmer, drawing on Oakeshott, suggests, "those who contemplate attend to meanings that are hidden" (1991, 12).

Public administration scholarship needs to move one past "a narrow creed of academic 'entrepreneurship' that has too fully accepted its intellectual/moral emasculation and neutralization as the bargain for publication in journals that launder narrow creed under the banner of 'peer review'" (Witt 2010). In this sense, academic writing in public administration is itself blind to any entrepreneurship that reveals its own unexamined complicity in such matters. "Academia is full of entrepreneurship that accepts the terms of the game" (Witt 2010).

Other problems experienced within the Academy include a lack of multilateral transparency among/

between "anointed" reviewers; such anonymity often constitutes "systemic and hegemonic abuse" of critical and dissenting discourse (Kouzmin et al. 2005; Kouzmin, Witt, and Thorne 2009, 358; Sankaran and Kouzmin 2005). This suppression of dissenting discourse is buttressed by a U.S. doctoral committee system that is self-policing and censorial of critical epistemologies and research issues to be undertaken. Academic publications are remarkable for a characteristic absence of "alien" citations—an intellective aspect of "reverse diglossia" (Candler 2006, 541). Patriotism is another ingredient in the "reverse diglossia" within the intellectual enterprise—another aspect of the Academy functioning to service power—to service the "King" (Farmer 2005). Finally, the axiomatic conjoining of high rejection rates with arrogant claims to international excellence/ranking of U.S. journals leads to the abuse/manipulation of journal rankings by U.S. and, increasingly, other academic tenure systems. The commercial "abuse" of copyright held by journals is the latest "innovation" to the globalizing, invisible, "gatekeeping" systems within the Academy and professional associations.

The depleted intellectual and social capital accruing to all of this invisibility depends on, and fosters, a "hazing" ritual homologous to everything otherwise deemed anathema to intellectual inquiry. These hazing dramas ritualistically instill a sense of anticipatory dread/shame/fear/loathing for transgressing the brutally mediocre morality of a dominant, venerated and mythic academic creed. From fraternities to Skull and Bones, this is the ritual that passes for academic, discursive excellence (Kouzmin, Witt, and Thorne 2009, 358).

Does Farmer Tackle These Issues of the Academy?

Farmer's new book will gravely unsettle the practitioner, even those inclined to look beyond the box—it is all too much to assimilate, to prioritize, to conclude on any aspect of career shortcomings, let alone failures. However, the book will give new sustenance to young, promising scholars in public administration who learn quickly what can and cannot be authored and submitted for publication. The inscrutability of many reviews—terse and scornful—and passed on as the intellectual norm (Kouzmin, Witt, and Thorne 2009, 359) can be neutralized. The exiting of voice and intellectual courage in public administration's faltering integrity can be reversed in the face of its own canon and unexamined capacities for critical/reflexive discourse and agency. Notwithstanding paradigmatic questions, epistemic pluralism more than helps to expose and/or transcend these "shadows" within which a castrated public administration wallows. Farmer's epistemic pluralism enervates, energizes, legitimates, canvases, and mobilizes voice and, in so doing, helps to highlight the fragile fissures of indifference and hegemony.

The "critical being"/"agentic" in Farmer's (2005) call to "kill the King" is not truncated here at the very heart of the "academic/ practitioner" enterprise within the public administration edifice. Unrivaled by peers, Farmer has articulated a vibrant language of public administration transgressing what is "sayable" and what is "un-sayable" (Farmer 1995). "Agency" beckoned by surrogacy, however, requires a little more. This "little more" should start with academic "gatekeepers" and others taking up the injunction for "public servants" to "converse imaginatively" and to take "unlimited responsibility …for each and every aspect of [their] official acts" (Farmer 2005, 138). Farmer does this admirably. He reveals, elucidates, and delegitimates many discursive narratives—deconstruction within a mute academy can be powerful when "speaking in more than very coy terms about elite prerogative and gambits as one creed of entrepreneurship" (Witt 2010).

Within criminally inclined trajectories, the body politic has become theater for colluding ruling elite behaviors, thus requiring a more forensically inclined public administration, Farmer's voice adds to the courageous inquiry into the holographics of contemporary, "sayable" public affairs analysis (Witt and deHaven-Smith 2008), the phenomenology of the "unsayable" (deHaven-Smith 2006) and the "isomorphism" by which oligarchs stage conflicts binding us all to brutal and divested civil liberty (Thorne and Kouzmin 2010), for example. "One must face, at conferences, real people making real decisions in the face of treacherous agendas" (Witt 2010). Critics of mainstream public administration are blind to the possibility that the "criminality" of the state has overtaken them and now far exceeds the bounds of their worst fears. A complex critique of the United States during the Cold War did emerge when society was reactionary, militaristic, trapped in technical rationality, unmindful of the oppression built into "civil society," in thrall to epistemic dichotomies. The critique, according to deHaven-Smith (2010), attributed the reactionary domestic policy and imperialistic foreign policy of the United States to a "lopsided, business-dominated competition of ideas, the unanticipated influence of the military-industrial complex and ontological and epistemological mistakes—not to the criminogenic actions of ruling elites who see democracy as a quaint fiction to be manipulated as necessary."

Heaven forbid, if this reviewer were to start over again in the bear pit of public administration. Like the novice graduate student, having Farmer alongside would be of some considerable comfort. It is not unkind to suggest that anyone who is frustrated with the academic edifice of U.S. public administration and who has not engaged with this book's epistemological richness and ontological implications is in denial or is self-deluding. It is also true that Farmer sees many points of view, but he may not see beyond the horizon and the "dread" of that gaze. As deHaven-Smith (2010) asks, "Is switching lenses and comparing perspectives—constructing an academic 'holographic' within which 'reality' can rapidly disappear beneath multiple interpretations—the best that we can do"?

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