

Book Review: Public Administration in Perspective Theory and Practice – Through Multiple Lenses, By David John Farmer (2015)

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Title:	Public Administration in Perspective Theory and Practice - Through Multiple Lenses (2010)
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Throughout its history, public administration (PA) has used different perspectives for analyzing the theory and practice, and both mainstream and alternative lenses have produced valuable insights. The Book has been crafted to give new life to PA theory and practice. It offers a comprehensive guide to 11 major approaches to PA. The Book also synthesizes these various perspectives with implications for PA management and planning. At the end of the Book, David Farmer presents PA as a whole body of integrated discourses (epistemic pluralism). Farmer invites us to include the

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liberating, emancipatory potential of critical thinking – toward a radical “listening to the other”. It entails: an openness to the other discourses, a rejection of modernist meta – narrative and the imperative to be opposed to existing authoritarian system.

This book aims to analyze and synthesize the implication, for theory and practice PA, of a variety of perspectives:

“Mainstream and other perspectives have produced valuable results. Yet single perspectives, or too few of them, can be misleading” (Farmer, 2010, p. 3)

“Looking at both public administration theory and practice through multiple lenses is what can be called epistemic pluralism. Epistemic refers to Knowing, pluralism refers to a strategy of more than one way, so theory and practice are examined from a variety of perspectives” (Farmer, 2010, p. 4)

In this book critical perspectives, includes 4 very important lenses - critical theory, postmodernism poststructuralism and feminism. These critical perspectives can trigger imaginative creativity in PA. They, analyzed together, can give innovation and new life in PA Theory and practice.

1. Critical Theory

The academic work of Critical Theory (the Frankfurt School of Germany) provides *Kritik* and alternatives to traditional, mainstream social economic and political theories, together with the full range of *Ideologie Kritik*. Critical Theory is related to critical political economy and an interest in the emancipation of those people who are oppressed, exploited and dominated. Now Critical Theory has become a major force in the debates about the PA. theory and practice.

We can describe David Farmer as framing the current political administrative situation in term of a critical thinking. His framework is based on critical social theory and elements including contradictions and dialectics, critical imagination and social emancipation. PA should seek emancipation toward the Lifeworld (Habermas' discourses).

“The background in Habermas’ account is that there is a tendency forward rationalization and colonization of the lifeworld. Should not PA discourse operate against this tendency, and promote means to pursue and sustain the lifeworld?”
(Farmer, 2010, p. 83)

2. Postmodernism and Poststructuralism

In the work “Modernity: An Incomplete Project” (1983) Juergen Habermas wrote: The project of Enlightenment is the project of modernity. This project formulated by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted of the efforts to develop science, universality of morality and law, according their modernist inner logic. They want to utilize culture for the rationalization, rational management and organization of everyday social life. More rationalization brings more happiness. The postmodernists argue against the validity of such a project.

Ideas prominent in the postmodernism are unknowingness, non-predictability, human emancipation and anti-foundationalism. In the first part of his book, David Farmer examines the significance for public administration theory and practice of the postmodernist and poststructuralist perspectives. It includes 5 elements: deconstruction, anti – administration, hyperreality, deterritorialization and imaginization (Farmer, 2010, pp. 93 - 100).

Postmodernism and poststructuralism can be used as a significant foundation of a new model for PA thinking. For example, the concept of Anti-administration:

“It wants to include not only mainstream ideas but also ideas that are other. Other here are the ideas of people who are excluded and marginalized...other also refers to ideas from discourses that are not dominant, nonmainstream economics, queer theory and ecology. In analyzing bureaucratic questions, anti-administration includes more focus on the nonbureaucratic, the nonsystematic and the nonmechanical” (Farmer, 2010, p. 97)

3. Feminism

Otherness is a fundamental category of thought; in his Book David Farmer explains that woman is seen as an other. He sketches the nature of feminism and describes its varieties; liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism and postmodern feminism. The aim of feminist public administration is seeking the way to overcome “othering” people:

“The term othering means marginalizing, putting outside of the main text, recognizing as on the edge... People and ideas can be othered by PA... woman is a people category that can be othered in PA.” (Farmer, 2010, p. 134)

Farmer recommends:

“Strategic planning for PA as a whole may well wish to extend feminist insights, applying the concept of othering to the bureaucratic treatment of its customers (clients and citizens) and seeking to remedy problem” (Farmer, 2010, pp. 134 - 135)

David farmer is seeking to overcome othering: stop the reduction of a whole person to the presenting problem.

“By whole person, I mean a whole person – in – herself – in – her – difference.... A whole person is one who has been developing a distinctive identity...It is a living being who is fully human.” (Farmer, 2010, pp. 135)

In reality the concept “Othering” is not used in mainstream PA practice.

Conclusion

The Book Public Administration by David John Farmer seeks to move PA scholars and practitioners beyond conventional thinking and acting by breaking down organizational, bureaucratic and conceptual boxes and by encouraging a commitment to public services backed by critical reflection within imaginative mindset. We see the following critical ideas;

- Break away from the past and the present PA discourses
- Be conscious of the language and words we use in PA
- Transcend disciplinary constraints: move to transdisciplinarity
- Seek creative imaginations
- Critical consciousness for the lifeworld of the people is important
- Use reflexive thoughts on ontology, epistemology, methodology and axiology.

Table 1: Farmer’s methodological guidelines include the following elements

Include and give priority to	Reject the benefit or exclusivity of
Non-reified approaches to thinking on administration	Unquestioned administrative authority, administration with constraints
Action fields	Disciplines (Political Science, Economics)
Thinking as play: Seeking knowledge and understanding	Thinking as work: Constrained, prescriptive, pragmatic activity
Interpretations (hermeneutics, contemplation, understanding)	Explanations
Epistemic Pluralism (multiplicity of robust lenses)	Positivism: unified science, single focus/lens
Multiple truths	Single truth
Post-traditional play: ethics, meanings, understanding	Traditional, mainstream methodologies.
Evidence from vignettes	Exclusive evidence from law or positivist research
Consciousness is important	Priority for content over multiple lenses
Connecting poetry and philosophy	Connecting the social world and physics
Emphasis on Wholes	Emphasis on Parts
Unknown, unseen	Known, understood
Qualitative	Quantitative
Art	Science
Reflexive, connotative language	Denotative language
Observer as creator	Observer as definer
Approach with multiple mindsets	Approach with Fundamental mindset

Include and give priority to	Reject the benefit or exclusivity of
Meaning is created	Meaning is to be learned
The world is subjective	The world is objective
Argument by reasons	Argument by causes
Understanding through interpretation	Understanding through observation, classification , deduction and inference
Undefined process	Clearly defined process
Why we see what we see	What we see
Purpose is understanding	Purpose is control
Knowing what	Knowing how

Source: (Cunningham and Wachhaus, 2016, pp. 3 - 4)

Farmer uses the term “lens” to help explain why we see what we see. He challenges the practitioners and academics of PA to adopt other lens as part of their conceptual framing process.

This Book can serve as a resource of interdisciplinary public administration and can be a catalyst in prompting readers’ own reflections about public administration. It does offer comprehensive accounts of theory and practice in public administration. The Book is also useful for students, who want to study PA through a multiplicity of perspectives and paradigms.

References

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