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Review of *Public Administration in Perspective: Theory and Practice Through Multiple Lenses* by David John Farmer

Gary S. Marshall

University of Nebraska at Omaha, gmarshal@unomaha.edu

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## Book Review

DAVID JOHN FARMER. *PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN PERSPECTIVE: THEORY AND PRACTICE THROUGH MULTIPLE LENSES*. ARMONK, NY: M.E. SHARPE, 2010.

Reviewed by  
Gary Marshall  
University of Nebraska at Omaha

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David Farmer's book *Public Administration in Perspective: Theory and Practice Through Multiple Lenses* maps the field of public administration in a new and comprehensive way. Farmer is, by far, one of the most knowledgeable writers in our field. His writing is creative, bold, and imaginative. Within public administration and political science, Farmer is a mentor to many and an inspiration to all who know him.

Farmer holds four graduate degrees, including a Ph.D. in economics from the University of London and a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Virginia. He worked in the highest administrative circles for the City of New York and the U.S. Department of Justice. During his career, he has been a consultant to 40 states and local governments. He has written five books, edited important symposia, and written countless articles. The books include *The Language of Public Administration: Bureaucracy, Modernity and Post-modernity* (1995) and *To Kill the King: Post-Traditional Governance and Bureaucracy* (2005). He also edited *Papers on the Art of Anti-Administration* (1998), which remains an important source of critique within the field.

This new book is a response to the persistent debate as to whether a heterodox public administration is appropriate to the field or a more orthodox empirical approach will yield better knowledge. As one might guess, Farmer is on the side of epistemic pluralism.

The book examines public administration from the following perspectives: traditional, business, economic, political, critical theory, post-structural, psychoanalytic, neuroscience, feminist, ethical, and data. The author juxtaposes these 11 perspectives with five core functions of public administration. They are planning, management, underlying public administration, the nature of the public administration field, and imaginative creativity in public administration (p. 11). A broad description of each function is provided. Planning includes

policy studies and policy analysis as well as administrative planning. Planning is also understood at different levels of administration and integrated with other traditional POSDCORB (Planning, Organizing, Staffing, Directing, Coordinating, Reporting and Budgeting) functions. Similarly, management is not limited to its narrow definition but is examined in the context of other administrative functions.

A third category, underlying public administration, refers to the broader context in which public administration is situated. To define it, Farmer notes:

Our participation in the world is not merely through rational calculations but also through such underlying and dynamic features as individual and societal consciousness and unconsciousness. Such features as ideology, language and symbols impact and shape the administrative (and much else). (pp. 13–14)

Two additional functions emphasize the relation between public administration and the larger social context. The scope of public administration, the fourth function, examines the boundaries of public administration. Are they dysfunctional? Are they arbitrary? Finally, how are they understood in the context of the fragmentation of the social sciences? For the fifth function, Farmer talks about imaginative creativity. He wants public administration to be as open as possible with this definition. Consistent with earlier writings, imaginative creativity requires a sense of irony, paradox, and play.

As mentioned, Farmer presents 11 perspectives in the book. He begins with the traditional perspective (i.e., the standard analysis of the field of public administration). The narrative considers seven distinct moments: (a) before World War II, (b) human relations, (c) the post–World War II challenge to POSDCORB, (d) heterodoxy, (e) oppositional emphasis in 1960s and 1970s, (f) new public management, and (g) pluralist or disconnect. Of the current moment, he writes:

Will such a different way be encouraged not merely by disappointment with New Public Management but also by fundamental rifts (or disconnects) in society? Such rifts (or disconnects) might result from globalization, from multiculturalism, and from parallel changes. Such may encourage recognition of the potential of the epistemic pluralist model. (p. 26)

Public administration from a business perspective is the topic of the second chapter. Two key themes are entrepreneurialism and the logic of the market. Farmer provides a rich analysis of the concept of the entrepreneur as used in the public administration literature. Narrowly circumscribed, it refers to a public-choice orientation toward delivering public goods. More broadly, however, the entrepreneur is an innovator (e.g., a public entrepreneur like

Robert Moses or a social entrepreneur like Baden-Powell) (p. 41). However, Farmer warns us not to be seduced by the mythology associated with entrepreneurialism.

When speaking of the business perspective, one cannot ignore the nexus between wealth and power. In that vein, Farmer underscores the effect of corporatism both on politics and on institutional legitimacy. He concludes that the logic of the market is “so entrenched in the United States and related societies that it is hard for public administration to have a way of thinking that is independent of the business perspective” (p. 43).

In the book’s third chapter, Farmer tells us that once economics took on a broader definition than its materially based origins, it became more influential. This increase in influence is evident in our field. Buchanan and Tullock’s (1962) *The Calculus of Consent*, after all, powerfully influenced the field, as did Vincent Ostrom’s (1973/2008) book *The Intellectual Crisis in Public Administration*. Many in public administration have, in principle, accepted the argument that bureaucratic systems ought to be replaced by decentralized market-like mechanisms. Farmer challenges us to examine the tacit assumptions associated with the economic perspective. For example, while price distortions are seen as rational within a market structure, they are not always advantageous in the delivery of public goods. This chapter is also valuable for its rich and balanced discussion of market fundamentalism: the notion that “market exchange is the best guide for all human actions” (p. 55).

The political perspective is implicit for public administration. We understand the politics–administration dichotomy, and we know the tension between public administration and political science, which for Farmer is embodied in Herbert Simon’s labeling of the academic discipline of public administration as a backwater. However, Farmer reminds us that, for both theory and practice, there is a close, even intimate, but unequal relation between politics and administration. Farmer’s sure-handed and eloquent analysis avoids hyperbole and unpacks this dynamic relation. Among the many important points in his discussion are the common issues that public administration and political science both face: (a) the enduring legacy of behavioralism and rational choice theory, (b) the subtle persistence of American exceptionalism discourse, and (c) the dialectical tension between bureaucracy and democracy.

Critical theory has much to say about administration and remains a salient discourse for the field. Farmer’s book provides a compelling overview of the three generations of critical theory research and practice and serves as an excellent primer. The first generation (the original Frankfurt School of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Lowenthal, Pollack, and others associated with the school, including Fromm and Benjamin) emphasized, as Farmer notes, a “philosophy of consciousness” (p. 80). Others have called it a social philosophy (Piccone, 1985). Their work shows the interplay among individual, society, and culture, and the aim was human empowerment based “on the

conscious and self-conscious actions of human subjects who anticipated in their self organization and intersubjective relations the structure of the future” (Piccone, 1985, p. 6).

The work of Jurgen Habermas is most representative of the second generation of critical theory. While communicative action and the primacy of language have supplanted the history of consciousness, the goals of human emancipation and freedom from domination have remained steady (p. 80). The third generation addresses critical theory in light of the postmodern condition. Farmer cites Axel Honnethwork as an example of critical theory’s response.

The works of Richard Box (1998, 2005, 2008), Robert Denhardt (1981a, 1981b), and Jay White (1982, 1999), among others, introduced and extended the application of critical theory to public administration. Farmer also connects critical theory to the theme of anti-administration:

Anti-administrative discourse exhibits radical openness in public administration thinking and action. It seeks to include not only mainstream ideas and people, but also ideas and people that are *other*—excluded or marginalized. It seeks to include people and ideas that are subordinate. For people, examples are financially poor clients and citizens, minorities and women, and employees dealing with their bosses. For ideas, the example I have given is greater inclusion of nonmechanical understandings. (pp. 84–85)

The post-structuralist perspective is an excellent match for today’s heterodox social experience. This approach has its basis in the groundbreaking work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who ably demonstrated that meaning operates on a system of difference. The linguist Roman Jakobson shared Saussure’s insights with the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who adapted this logic to the analysis of human culture. Meaney notes: “This shift from studying single objects—whether it be a syllable, a sentence, a family or a culture—in favor of analyzing the relations among them was the essence of structuralism” (2011, p. 4). Post-structuralism advanced by Derrida and others holds to the logic of binary oppositions without holding to Lévi-Strauss’s essentialism. Farmer notes: “Post-structuralism objects to the structuralist idea that, at least in principle, the world is comprehensible through analysis of systems and structures” (p. 91). Structure becomes an “intersection of presences and absences [wherein] underlying codes have to be inferred from surface manifestations” (Giddens, 1984, p. 16).

Has post-structuralism had any impact on public administration? Farmer suggests that its impact has been marginal and that interest in it has waned because public administration is fad conscious (p. 95). Nevertheless, post-structuralism remains an effective analytical strategy for explaining the paradoxes we face in public administration and in broader social contexts.

Much has been made of public administration’s emphasis on rationality

and predictability. The psychoanalytic perspective recognizes the rational but avers that administrative processes can be bounded and contained in such a way that the rational always prevails. An earlier book edited by Farmer (1998), *Papers on the Art of Anti-Administration*, includes an account by McSwite (1998) of the mail delivery processes in a large federal agency. The mail services manager won a government-wide award for efficiency. Only later was it learned that on a daily basis he had been burning a significant portion of the agency's mail to meet the agency's performance goals.

Perhaps this example is too glib. However, the psychoanalytic perspective reminds us that we as human beings act in ways that belie our conscious intentions. Farmer summarizes three components of the psychoanalytic perspective: Freudian, Jungian, and Lacanian. He summarizes each of these approaches and then provides examples of how each can inform planning, organizational theory, workplace dynamics, the broader field of public administration, and imaginative creativity. Farmer ends with a classic quote from Freud:

Just as Kant warned us not to overlook the fact that our perceptions are subjectively conditioned and must not be regarded as identical with what is perceived though unknowable, so psycho-analysis warns us not to equate perceptions by means of consciousness with the unconscious mental processes, which are their object. Like the physical, the psychical is not necessarily in reality what it appears to be. (p. 114)

Quantum leaps in technology have propelled neuroscience to the forefront of the human sciences. Genome mapping and PET scans have allowed us to verify empirically what only previously had been hypothesized. At the outset of his discussion on the neuroscience perspective, Farmer makes two important points. First, neuroscience does not imply biological determinism. Second, public administration trails the pack in its understanding of neuroscience's potential application to the field. Advances in neuroscience have implications for the study of decision making, motivation, emotion, and stereotyping—all areas germane to public administration (p. 121). Moreover, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio's work calls into question public administration's enduring ideal of administrative man [sic]. Coining the term "neuro-gov," Farmer offers:

Neuroscience can be expected to act as a catalyst, in the longer run, in facilitating reunification of the fragmented social sciences (e.g., including political science and economics) and social action subjects (including public administration and business administration) that concern governance. (p. 125)

In his discussion of the feminist perspective, Farmer gives an excellent summary of the history of feminism, in light of both the historical waves of feminism and the varieties of feminism: liberal, socialist, radical, and post-modern. In discussion of both liberation and oppression, he reminds us of

Marilyn Frye's argument that "women are oppressed, *as women*" (as cited on p. 129). Frye's argument continues:

Members of certain racial and/or economic groups and classes, both the males and the females, are oppressed as members of those races and/or classes. But men are not oppressed *as men*. (cited in Farmer, pp. 129–130)

Farmer also draws our attention to an important postmodern feminist argument—the distinction Luce Irigaray made between "speaking *like* a woman and *as* a woman" (p. 129).

The feminist perspective also brings out an underlying epistemological point, the duality of Self and Other. Simone de Beauvoir's powerful insight that women are seen as "other" can inform public administration. Farmer writes: "Public administration tends to *other* people and ideas that do not fit into its way of seeing the world. . . . On the other hand public administration is *othered*" (p. 128). As one can infer, othering is the process of reducing the richness of a whole person (or a set of ideas) to an object. This process can have pernicious effects for those receiving services (e.g., welfare recipients) and for the field of public administration as a whole when it is reduced to its technicist definition.

In his discussion of the ethical perspective, Farmer shares with us a rich discussion of the moral dimension of ethics. This discussion is informative not only for the concise way in which Farmer summarizes the deontological and utilitarian approaches but also for the way in which he brings those ideas to bear on practical issues in administration. This chapter is also important for its discussion of regulative ideals. He argues that efficiency does not have to be the overriding ethic by which public administration is practiced.

The ethical approach that Farmer supports is authentic hesitation. He concludes:

Among the arguments for authentic hesitation are (1) the uncertainty or indecisiveness that surrounds moral claims, and (2) the advantages of being open to the Other—other persons and other perspectives. Such authentic hesitation has a long history in Western and Eastern philosophies, under such names as trust, toleration, mutual respect, mutual recognition, sympathy, public reason and giving full consideration to the arguments of others. (p. 152)

The final perspective discussed is called the data perspective. Farmer recognizes the importance of epistemology in talking about data. He notes that both positivist and hermeneutic analyses should be valued in public administration. He explains how each can be used. Farmer also reminds us that public administration can enrich its understanding of phenomena of interest by loosening rather than tightening its intellectual boundaries. The chapter ends with a compelling

discussion about the role that books play in stimulating innovation in the field. Farmer shares responses from a variety of public administration writers to the questions: (a) "What book, above all others, changed your professional life?" and (b) "What, in a sentence, is the book about?" (p. 165).

The second part of the book is called "Synthesis for Theory and Practice." As discussed in the opening section of this review, Farmer's 11 perspectives are juxtaposed with five core functions: planning, management, underlying public administration, the nature of the public administration field, and imaginative creativity in public administration. The author sees synthesis as a hermeneutic activity rather than a purely analytic one. He reminds us that complexity in analysis forces us to contend with our biases, conscious and unconscious, as well as the answer we think we know. This stance is consistent with the ideal of the self-aware administrator. Of his own journey as a public administrator, Farmer writes:

In retrospect, the most impressive (to me) part of my planning experience is what I did not know. I was excited when functioning as a budget analyst, for instance, to see the logic of connecting planning with budgeting and then programming—and then to evaluation, looping back to planning. It was only many years later that I came to understand about lobbying—ironically about the connection of money (in such forms as campaign money) and budgeting and planning and so forth. It is significant for readers (and me) to attempt honest self-reflection. (p. 177)

Thus, this section of the book is developed in precisely such a fashion. It examines in what ways existing practices can be changed by applying new theoretical lenses and examining specific decisions.

This section also underscores the value of epistemic pluralism. Indeed, if public administration is to remain viable, it must become self-aware in a way that encourages students, administrators, and researchers to think and act pluralistically. The style employed in this section has a performative quality to it. The author demonstrates how to apply multiple perspectives.

The final section of the book examines public administration as a whole. Farmer suggests to us that we in public administration must "cultivate our consciousness . . . to prepare ourselves to escape our commonsense delusions and to nourish our counterintuitive ideas" (p. 223). He offers a regimen for contemplation in four parts: reflecting on new syntheses, applying our lived experience to these syntheses, applying new syntheses to public administration programs and situations, and learning to recognize and use the unfamiliar.

This book can be used at both the master's and doctoral level. Master's-level students will be—some for the first time—introduced to multiple ways of knowing. In that sense, Farmer's work is a welcome addition to the more familiar range of ideas that are the standard bearers of the field. Importantly, the younger cohort of public administration graduate students that we now teach have already



been exposed to a heterodox view of social science and will expect epistemic pluralism. At the doctoral level, this book is an important primer. It establishes a broad landscape of approaches that can be used for research.

Farmer's view is that a good practitioner must be nimble, agile, creative, and, above all, intellectually able. We must train ourselves—he uses the metaphor of a treadmill—and gain the fitness and strength to change existing practices. This book is an important vehicle for becoming so.

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