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Postmodernism, "Reality" and Public Administration: A Discourse

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Deconstructing Administrative Behavior:
The "Real" as Representation

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of this symposium "what is real" presents a significant challenge. What is "real" is generally acknowledged through one's paradigmatic commitment which presents "reality" from a specific point of reference. The view asserted in this essay is that what we conventionally call "reality" is a never ending series of representations that are defined by the text or discourse presented. This essay uses deconstruction—an analytical strategy—to examine *Administrative Behavior*, a text that powerfully influenced public administration in the 20th century.

POSTMODERNISM

A discussion of the postmodern condition is hardly necessary as we approach the *fin de siècle*. Indeed, we are already accustomed to a world where traditionally held categories of meaning are continually revealed as illusory and/or unstable. In the recently published *Postmodern Public Administration*, the editors of this symposium identify four key themes of the postmodern experience. First, stable communication is no longer possible in an age of continually manipulated information and symbols. Second, life is increasingly self-referential. As the line between news and entertainment blurs, our social experience no longer provides a point of reference for what is "real." Third, not only is our reality self-referential, it is also thin and fleeting. Finally, postmodernism suggests a decentered self where all the world is a text.

MODERNISM AND THE CARTESIAN LEGACY

For a significant period after World War II, our field was influenced by the social, political, and technological developments associated with modernism. At its zenith, modernist thought spoke the discourse of technical rationality emphasizing progress, logic and reason. By most accounts, modernist epistemology now appears to pose as many questions as answers. We've come to view Western society as over-rationalized to the point that the cause-and-effect model of inquiry is no longer meaningful. This summary of modernism would alarm very few. The discussion that confronts us in the midst of postmodern "reality" concerns modes of action and inquiry. In that regard, the postmodern experience leaves us anxious and uncomfortable. I submit that this is due to the narrative of the modern "self."

The majority of us owe our view of "self" to Descartes. As in our current episteme, the period in which Descartes wrote his *Meditations on First Philosophy* was a period in which fundamental ideas were in flux. It reflected a shift away from the connection to some larger universe such as the church or the natural divinity of the heavens. In place of the doctrine of immanent teleology was the rise of modern science, evidenced through the works of Copernicus, Galileo, and Bacon. Hence, there was clearly confusion over the relationship between human beings and the universe around them. Stated plainly, if human beings could no longer rely on the natural world nor the word of God, then how could they find certainty, truth, or a rationale for their existence?

In the *Meditations,* Descartes begins a downward spiral into doubt. In the midst of this doubt, Descartes comes to the conclusion that there *is* one point that is fundamental, true and certain. He realizes that even though he is doubting all the accepted truths that he has been taught, even as he is doubting his own existence, this doubt is a reaffirmation of his own existence. Thus, the famous line of the cogito is "I think; therefore I exist."

It is this statement that came to define modern consciousness. From this point forward, all expressions of existence begin with the self. Nevertheless, the Cartesian quest for certainty places humanity in a very precarious position. For, if no fundamental framework is found, then all existence is thrown into doubt. This fear of relativism is what Richard Bernstein (1988) describes as Cartesian anxiety.

In the late 20th century, our earlier reliance on scientific truth and the subsequent disillusion with modernism's overarching narrative has left us anxious but also relentlessly aware. A dynamic aspect of the postmodern experience is resistance to the search for "Truth." Postmodernists argue that the modernist perspective constitutes a grand discourse that is really no more than a style of thinking. Rather than trying to represent reality through a grand discourse, they argue that there is no way to represent reality and that all attempts at representation are just multiple discourses as a theory of representations (Calas, 1987). Based on this view, postmodernists tend to suspend judgment and employ innovative ways of "representing" taken-for-granted aspects of our modern consciousness.

HERBERT SIMON AND TWENTIETH CENTURY PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In a twist that is not inconsistent with the postmodern experience, this past July, Herbert Simon received the Dwight Waldo Award of the American Society for Public Administration for his contributions to the field of public administration. Anyone familiar with the Simon-Waldo debate, which is well documented in the *American Political Science Review*, is sure to find some irony in this turn of events.

In the 20th century, the discourse of public administration is one that has its roots in the progressive movement but most fully reflects the rational model of administration delineated in Herbert Simon's *Administrative Behavior*. Although he moved away from the discipline of public administration and

expressed some disdain for the field,[1] the text was of paramount importance. Critiques of Simon's work include those of Waldo (1952), Banfield (1958), Storing (1962), Argyris (1973), and March (1978). In 1988 and 1989, *Public Administration Quarterly* published a two volume retrospective on Simon. In one of the articles for the retrospective, Dunn (1988) noted that all but one of 27 public administration textbooks written since 1975 discuss *Administrative Behavior*.

Scholars in the field have taken issue with different parts of the meta-narrative that Simon proposed for human behavior and for the administration of public organizations. Later in this essay I will propose some methodological tactics to examine the instability of Simon's meta-narrative.

PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNING

When Simon wrote *Administrative Behavior*, his challenge to the body of knowledge that existed in public administration was to articulate, in clear and unambiguous terms, a method and approach to public administration that mirrored the discourse of science. Scientific discourse was firmly established as the way of explaining events in the "natural" world. The two key assumptions of scientific discourse are (1) a world independent of human existence and (2) the possibility for the objectivity of facts. These assumptions are compatible with the philosophical doctrine of logical positivism upon which Simon based his views (Simon, 1957). The premise of this doctrine is

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[1] The following quote from Simon's autobiography *Models of My Life* is instructive:

> But my actual research career started in an academic backwater: public administration. However important that field was and is to public affairs, it attracted few scholars with real understanding of what research was about, or how to construct the theoretical foundations for an applied field. Viewed by the norms of science, many of the books published in public administration (and management generally) are positively embarrassing...(1991, p. 114).

that there is a world around us whose existence and character is independent of what exists in our minds. Truth is derived through physical sensations produced by our encounter with this independently existing world. The positivist perspective asserts that, over its history, natural science has come closer to the "truth" about this independent world. This "progress" in moving toward the "truth" about the world around us suggests that social scientists will be successful if they follow the same precepts as natural science.

According to Simon, facts are incontrovertible. They are deemed correct by those experts in the hierarchy who have the technical ability and knowledge to put together the structure required for developing a rational course of action. Simon's view holds that there are universal principles of rationality which are *a priori* in the form and structure of rational thought. The structure and form of rationality includes the notion that rational statements obey the laws of logic and also form an interlocking system of hypotheses and conclusions. These rules constitute a set of unambiguous and precise procedures that, from the Simonian perspective, ultimately can be developed into an algorithm that could be programmed into a computer as a set of decision premises.

Simon's view of human behavior had a sustaining impact on the field of public administration. His rational model of administration assumes a formal organizational structure based on stable rational behavior. Rational behavior in this case is the efficient achievement of the pre-determined goals of the organization. In addition, Simon viewed human beings as having limited rationality. He argued that the human mind is very limited in its ability to rationally solve complex problems (Simon, 1957). As a result, his approach reflects a different ontological stance toward human beings. In it, human beings are characterized by the instrumental relationships of the formal rational organization.

The key aspects of Simon's ontological stance are that the world is external to us and the processes of the human mind are very limited. This limit is manifested in the ability to consciously choose a course of action determined by a complex ex-

ternal environment. That external environment is real and can be apprehended. The more we can know that environment through the gathering of information, the better our decisions will be. Thus, life is a series of decision points in which human beings must constantly choose point "A" or point "B." In *The Sciences of the Artificial*, Simon (1969) compares the behavior of man with the behavior of ants. Both are "behaving systems" whose actions are not a reflection of one's internal processes but of the complexity of the external environment.

One of the issues for those in the field of public administration to consider is the extent to which the field was swayed by the narrative that we attribute to Herbert Simon. Deconstruction, the methodological approach discussed in the next section, argues that there can be no one true representation of reality. As a result, my argument is not to dismiss theories of cognitive psychology based on complex information processing in favor of or to romanticize another view (e.g. the traditionalists) (see White & McSwain, 1993). However, from the deconstructive stance, science is just one of many narratives that impact on our experience. More importantly, it suggests just how fragile meaning is.

ANALYTICAL STRATEGIES AND METHODOLOGICAL TACTICS

Analytical strategy

In response to the challenge of what is real, this essay will introduce an analytical strategy—deconstruction, which is consistent with the postmodern experience. Deconstruction evolved along with the postmodern line of thought. It is a strategy which exposes the devices by which meaning is created in traditional writing and discourse. Traditional writing and discourse imputes meaning to the words that we speak. The deconstructive stance follows the Saussurean (1966) tradition which argues that language is a closed system of signs and that meaning emerges from the differences between elements of this system. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1973; 1976)

is most closely associated with this approach. For Derrida, all the world is a text, whether these texts be written documents, institutional practices, or events that occur in a given culture. Based on this view, language is implicated in the structuring of what is called "reality." As a result, deconstruction is an excellent strategy for re-examining taken-for-granted assumptions. Calas and Smircich note the following about deconstruction:

> This approach allows us to re-trace how rhetorical and linguistic forms used to signify 'knowledge' work under the assumption that they represent a referent which is external to language. Deconstruction helps us understand how this assumption masks the play of textual signification where words are meaningful, not because of their external referents, which are also linguistically constituted but because of the existence of an oppositional term which each apparently 'self-standing' term stands to differentiate itself from the other, and become meaningful (1992, p. 569).

The deconstructive stance challenges the modernist viewpoint by taking apart a text to show that there are no irreducible truths or essences in it but only instances of discourse. Deconstruction shows, for example, what has been left out, distorted, or compacted, as Marshall and White (1990) point out:

> Implicit in this postmodern (poststructuralist) posture is the view that all epistemological arguments are linguistic constructions. These constructions from the postmodern viewpoint must be *deconstructed* to reveal their true nature as discourses. Such deconstruction serves not to *destroy* but to question the irreducibility of fundamental truths to which discourse are wont to lay claim. Hence what deconstruction does is expose truths as styles of thought or products of discourse (1990, p. 71).

Methodological tactics

The next section explores five methodological tactics that are then applied to sections of Chapter 5 of *Administrative Behavior*. These methodological tactics correspond to the deconstructive stance explained above. In presenting these ideas, I rely on the works of Calas, (1987), Calas & Smircich, (1988; 1991), Culler (1982), Jacques (1990), and Martin,(1990).

Privileged terms

One way to assess a text is to look for privileged terms. When privileged terms dominate a writing, they stand out because they contain the inner logic for the set of ideas being presented in the text. They serve as an anchor for the explanations that emanate from a "founding" word. Privileged terms define a discourse by presenting themselves as prior to the discourse to which they authorize meaning. In transcending the discourse presented, they serve as pillars of certainty. Sarup (1989) notes:

Western philosophy has...[relied on] a belief in some ultimate 'word,' presence, essence, truth or reality which will act as the foundation of all our thought, language, and experience (p. 40).

Privileged terms are transcendent, beyond definition. In that sense, their meaning carries the illusion of certainty. They are also signaled by their frequent appearance in a text, yet they are introduced without definition. In *Administrative Behavior*, rationality is such a founding word. It is prior to the system which authorizes rationality as the basis for administrative action. Similarly, the terms choice, decision, and expert are also privileged in *Administrative Behavior*.

It is important to note that the identification of a set of privileged terms emphasizes less the normative implications than the explanatory power that the perspective provides. By highlighting terms that are privileged, one can see the way in which language structures reality.

Column comparisons

As an additional tactic to highlight the privileged terms of a discourse, this essay employs a "column comparison." The column comparison provides a way to see the privileged terms and their opposites. In this article, I compare opposite terms as a way to highlight the structure of the discourse that is presented in *Administrative Behavior*. Below is a brief example from *How Institutions Think* (Douglas, 1986).

Analogy with the complementarity of the right and left hand and the complementarity of gender provide great rhetorical resources (Needham, 1973). So the equation 'female is to male as left is to right,' reinforces the social principle with a physical analogy. Though the division of labor in itself is not going to take us far into the organizing of society, this one analogy is a basic building block. For example the following:

female	male
left	right
people	king

In modern industrial society the analogical relation of hand to head was frequently used to justify class structure, the inequalities of the educational system, and the division of labor between the manual and intellectual worker (p. 49).

Denotative Language

The emphasis that deconstruction places on writing is one where multiple interpretations of a text are possible. One of the arguments of the analytic tradition and of positivism is that words are denotative. Objective meaning is imputed to words as opposed to connotative language, which refers to an implied or associated idea (*Webster's*, 1972).

The premise of positivism is that inquiry into the social world can mirror the methods of discovery used in natural science. Special emphasis is placed on scientific language which is designed to replicate the structure of the natural world (Calas, 1987; Kolakowski, 1968). Yet, how sure are we that words have precise and unique definitions? Even the simplest exercise, such as defining a chair, shows that definitions are more ambiguous than some are wont to claim. (Must it have four legs? Are ergonomic platform seats included?) This issue is especially important in *Administrative Behavior* because the preface claims that the book's goal is to construct a vocabulary that transparently represents how an administrative organization looks and operates (Simon, 1957, p. xiv).

Deconstruction emphasizes the instability of language. In many cases, a text includes sections where the writing lays claim to logical arguments and denotative facts but appeals to rhetoric and naturalizing metaphors, which connote a "truth" that is claimed to be empirically verifiable.

Unified Subject

"I am who I am!" is an expression of individualism that seems essential to our 20th century consciousness. This individualism has been prominent since the Enlightenment. As we have seen, the idea of the self as a unified, coherent subject is embodied in the Cartesian revelation of self-presence, which seemingly proves that each of us has a unique identity. As an author, this unique identity "authorizes" one authoritative voice that emanates from the text. Yet in most writing, one can find multiple subjects in the text.

I agree with Jacques (1990) who notes that most texts denote a rational actor who has control over his/her environment. Upon closer look one finds many "actors." In *Administrative Behavior*, implied subjectivity is given to (1) the formal organization, (2) the researcher, (3) the phenom-enon of rationality, (4) the role of the expert, (5) the technology of administration, and (6) science as the legitimating authority.

The deconstructionist perspective argues that as reality is structured through language, so too is the human self or subject a creation of language. In that context the rational, individual agent, the modern subject, recedes in the discourse of language, signs, and symbols.

Contradictions and Disruptions

Contradictions and disruptions appear as words, phrases, or ideas that contradict the flow of the argument of the text that surrounds them. It is akin to an unconscious outburst. As noted earlier in this article, any text is a product of the different discourses. Traditional writing and discourse seeks to reduce the ambiguity of the set of ideas being presented. It does this through the structure of the discourse. At the same time, it censors the "self-errant" ideas that do not fit into the logical scheme (Cooper, 1989).

Contradictions or disruptions in a text occur at a point where an underlying tension threatens to "surface" or create instability. For example, nestled in the middle of Chapter 5 of *Administrative Behavior* is a tale ostensibly about statistical correlation and the problem of discovering what factors are and are not important to any given problem. Instead, Simon recounts a revealing story about "old maids" and "spinsters" in the English countryside. In addition to deviating from the proposed rigor and scientific tenor of *Administrative Behavior,* the story suggests the power of scientists, who, in the context of their objectivity, ponder about old maids. The text also suggests the power of scientists (men) over women in the scientists' ability to treat women as "spurious" things or as the cause of "devious consequences."

DECONSTRUCTING ADMINISTRATIVE BEHAVIOR

Next, this essay applies these methodological tactics to Chapter 5 of *Administrative Behavior*.

CHAPTER V

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF

ADMINISTRATIVE DECISIONS

If the psychological environment of choice, the "givens," were determined in some accidental fashion, then adult behavior would show little more pattern of integration than the behavior of children. A higher degree of rationality can however be achieved, because the environment of choice can be deliberately modified. Partly this is an individual matter: the individual places himself in a situation where certain stimuli and certain items of information will impinge on him. To a very important extent, however, it is an organizational matter. One function that organization performs is to place the organization members in a psychological environment that will

"Determine, integrate, achieve, modify, adapt, and perform." These verbs all signify devotion to a system in which choice, decision, and rationality are given privileged status.

The subjectivity of the individual is acknowledged and then subjectivity is redefined through the organizational member. A transformation in the name of progress is required: the transformation from boy to man. The oppositions are well implied:

boys   men

primitive   advanced

body   mind

penis   phallus

defer   choose

ambiguity   clarity

adapt their decisions to the organization objectives, and will provide

The innate capacity to adapt is stressed. For Simon

them with the information needed to make those decisions correctly (p. 79).

Incompleteness of Knowledge

The first limitation upon rationality in actual behavior has been mentioned in Chapter IV.

Rationality implies a complete, and unattainable, knowledge of the exact consequences of each choice.

In actuality, the human being never has more than a fragmentary knowledge of the conditions surrounding his action, nor more than

evolutionary survival is accorded to those with the highest level of rationality. The most rational are the most successful at adaptation.

The discourse of boundaries and limitations is employed.

The terms in the right hand column describe the discourse of bounded rationality, while the terms in the left hand column are neither practical nor empirical.

Infinite	*finite*
complete	*incomplete*
full knowledge	*incomplete knowledge*
omniscience	*predicatablity*
miracles	*adaptation*
unattainable	*pragmatic*

A sublime notion of rationality—we can conceive of it, but it is destined to remain unpresentable (an illusion).

The illusion of objective knowledge legitimates an independent world with natural laws and regularities. The paradox is that if human beings have only incomplete knowledge, then it

a slight insight into the regularities and laws that would permit him to induce future consequences from a knowledge of present circumstances (pp. 81-82).

Even to state the problem in this form is to recognize the extent to which complete rationality is limited by lack of knowledge. If each fire were reported to the department at the moment ignition occurred, fire losses would miraculously decline. Lacking such omniscience, the fire department must devote considerable effort to securing as promptly as possible, through special alarm systems and otherwise, information regarding situations where its action is needed.

This point has been developed in some detail in order to emphasize that it poses an extremely practical problem of administration—to secure an organization of the decision-mak-ing

will always be impossible to know what the "actual" conditions are and if such a world "actually" exists.

The knowledge that we do have is attained through insight. The word "insight" is defined as:

> "the power of apprehending the inner nature of things, intuition" (Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1972).

This is an example of a privileged term that contains traces of its opposite:
rationality-intuition;
knowledge-insight.

Again, the discourse of boundaries and limitations comes to the fore. Complete rationality would require miracles and omniscience. Instead, the modern version of divine intervention—the discourse of science—is employed.

Administration is the business of practical solutions. This statement suggests that the role of administration has been redefined to one of instrumental technique. As a result, only certain knowledge is relevant within the newly defined boundaries of administration. Administration is driven by a theory of performativity. The notion of

process such that the relevant knowledge will be brought to bear at the point where the decision is made. The same point might have been illustrated with respect to a business organization—the dependence of its decisions, for example, on the correct prediction of market prices (pp. 81-82).

The human being striving for rationality and restricted within the limits of his knowledge has developed some working procedures that partially overcome this difficulty. These procedures consist in assuming that he can isolate from the rest of the world a closed system containing only a limited number of variables and a limited range of consequences (pp. 81-82).

This is a story to the effect that a statistician once found a very high correlation between the number of old maids and the size of the clover crop in different English counties. After puzzling over this relation for some time, he was able to trace what appeared to him to be the causal chain. Old maids, it appeared, kept cats; and cats ate field mice. Field

performativity suggests that efficient system performance is the ultimate criterion by which all other actions and behavior are judged.

At work is the basic opposition of inclusion and exclusion, wherein certain types of knowledge are included and other types of knowledge are excluded. In this vein it is often argued that "knowledge is power." Benhabib suggests that: "not only is knowledge power, but power generates access to knowledge, thus preparing for itself a self-perpetuating basis of legitimacy." (1984, p. 105).

Acceptable knowledge constitutes those ideas variables, concepts, issues, and facts that produce simulated miracles; whatever elements lead to a decision.

More cats—fewer mice—more bumble bees—more clo-ver.

Who are these "old maids?" (old maid: "spinster", "a prim nervous fussy person"; (Webster Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1971).

mice, however, were natural enemies of bumble bees, and these latter were, in turn, the chief agents in fertilizing the flowers of the clover plants. The implication, of course, is that the British Parliament should never legislate on the subject of marriage bonuses without first evaluating the effect upon the clover crop of reducing the spinster population.

In practical decision-making, devious consequences of this sort must of necessity be ignored. Only those factors that are most closely connected with the decision in cause and time can be taken into consideration. The problem of discovering what factors are, and what are not, important in any given situation is quite as essential to correct choice as a knowledge of the empirical laws governing those factors that are finally selected as relevant (pp. 8-82).

What kind of webs do these spinsters spin? Webs to catch men and kill them just as black widow spiders do to insects such as bumble bees. OR Women who can't "catch" a man? Two categories that are outside the mainstream of women who are willing to capitulate to the male contract. "Good Girls" vs. "Bad Girls."

WARNING: The warning that the author sounds is that women will foul up the purity of rationality.

Q: Why is this passage in the text? It is totally inconsistent with the seriousness, rigor, and scientific tenor of the treatise.

A: It is giving voice, albeit unconsciously, to the themes of a different voice—a voice that respects those "devious consequences."

(Devious: "located off the high road", Deviate: "to stray esp. from a standard, principle, or topic"; (Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, 1971)).

The causal chain is very logical yet the author states that this is a case that is spurious.

CONCLUSION

Postmodern ontology?

In the preface of this article, I suggested that a different ontological stance exists in the current social experience. That ontological stance suggests that being committed to a set of beliefs or belief in the idea of meaning is a distinctly modern notion. This ontological view takes the position that the world is a text. A text includes not only written documents, but all forms of communication, institutions and their repositories of ideas, as well as events that occur in the culture, and they are all structured by language. Derrida, in his explanation of logocentrism, argues that we are caught up in the metaphysics of presence that is supported by the Cartesian view of existence. From the Cartesian view of the world we gain the idea of the modern self, an individual who (1) has a distinct identity, (2) is aware of his/her existence through the presence of one's inner voice, and (3) experiences a reality that is a clear and transparent representation of the natural world.

Based on this Cartesian view, we have been searching through the perspective of modern science for a representation of what we perceive to be true reality. This true reality refers to an external independent world that has a natural and logically definable order to it. As such, events in the world can be explained through words, knowledge, and beliefs that are understood to have innate properties.

The deconstructive stance that I argue for in this article suggests that the view articulated above with a natural world that is independent of human existence reflects a logocentric style of thinking. Instead, the Derridean stance that I take in this work argues that language is implicated in the structuring of our view of "reality(ies)." Thus, rather than viewing language as the instrument to point out, describe, and represent "the world," there is an endless set of "worlds" that are constituted through language. Calas (1987) points out that adopting a deconstructive stance "allows one to conceive `the world' as

representation, instead of focusing on how *the world* is pre-sented. It calls attention to the construction of 'representation' as theory, with as many implications as possible, rather than the construction of 'a stable theory' for the purpose of representation" (p. 128-129).

Knowledge as textual production

Administrative Behavior continues to have great significance as a discourse in public administration. It appeals to the distinctly modern sensibility for the superiority of science, the faith in the idea of progress, and the desire for rational explanation. Science, progress, and rationality are all privileged terms in the discourse of modern Western society. The deconstructive stance acknowledges the status of these terms within the cultural order, and while pointing out their privileged status neither denies their impact, nor seeks to invert their status in favor of another set of privileged terms. Rather, by adopting a stance that emphasizes signification as the play of differences between signs, the iterability of writing, and the commutability of meaning, the search for narrative takes on the notion of play, of

The Postmodern Turn and the Socratic Gadfly

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The postmodern perspective provides a real opportunity for deepening understanding of the public administration act, encouraging the public administration thinker to imitate the Socratic gadfly. To support this central claim, this paper makes three subsidiary claims about real knowledge in public administration thinking. First, real knowledge about the public administration act (what practitioners do and what they should do) is provided by the postmodern view of justice. The second recognizes the reflexive or perspectivist epistemology that postmodernism embraces. It is possible to illustrate how any real knowledge about the public administration act is limited to knowledge from a set of particular perspectives. Third, real knowledge about the public administration act in

These three subsidiary claims, taken together, raise the prospect of anti-administration, and it is this juxtaposition of "administration and anti-administration" that can be fruitful for real insights about the public administration act. The slogan, anti-administration, can be understood as program administration that is simultaneously directed at negating administrative-bureaucratic power (for more discussion, see Farmer, 1995). It is a form of administering that is radically skeptical about its own competence, reflecting postmodernism's skepticism. It is a form of managing that negates the hierarchical-rational Weberian outlook and that privileges