At the nexus: The transformative practice of public administration

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to draw on critical theory infused with Gramscian activism to envision and argue for a transformative practice of public administration. The call for a transformative practice of public administration is predicated on the assumption that the bureaucracy does not equal the state. The phrasing *transformative administrator* is suggested by Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) discussion of critical research approaches in which they describe critical research as requiring a transformative intellectual to act as advocate and activist. A transformative administrator accepts certain assumptions about politics and knowledge, recognizing that thought and ideas are fundamentally influenced by power relations that are socially and historically constituted. Following this, a transformative practice of public administration recognizes the potential for all citizens to be democratic philosophers.

In a fundamental way, the theory and practice of public administration is at the heart of all questions of government and civic life. Seventy years ago, the Italian theorist and political activist Antonio Gramsci noted that the law was at the intersection of the state and civil society, possessing the simultaneous potential for both coercion and transformation. In the current age, as government permeates nearly every aspect of life, Gramsci’s observation might well be modified: it is public administration that is at the nexus of state and civil society. Public servants function as the mediators, in many instances, between the citizens and their elected representatives – and the reverse. They are in a unique position to perpetuate the status quo, or maneuver toward change.

It is a powerful position to be in, and an isolating one. Public servants, somehow, are neither fish nor fowl – neither “citizens” nor elected officials. Consequently, they are often scorned by both the political representatives and the citizens they serve, despite the perception in the literature that public service is a “calling” or a kind of vocation (Lewis, 1991). This bizarre limbo was vividly illustrated for me early in my public career, when I had recently begun to work at the U.S. Department of Commerce. One of the responsibilities of our office was to disseminate information about doing business in the Caribbean Basin. One day a caller inquired about importing and exporting regulations. I could give him general guidelines, but recommended that he consult a customs broker for specific information. It was clear that the caller didn’t want to retain a customs specialist, because he continued to push for detailed instructions that I was not qualified to provide. Rather than give him erroneous information, I continued to suggest that he obtain a specialist’s advice. Finally, the caller informed me: “I am a U.S. citizen. My taxes pay your salary, so you work for me. I demand that you get me this information!” – as if we public servants paid no income taxes ourselves. By his logic, I figured that I was self-employed.

This anonymous caller’s attitude, distasteful as I found it, left a profound impression. I had approached his questions in good faith, making my best effort to respond to his needs. I had offered to send information, refer him to others who could better respond to his queries, and...
had spent a good deal of time with him explaining the general purposes of the program. Why
the hostility? The civil service was instituted as a meritocracy, a means for ensuring that the
best-qualified individuals were hired to do the job. Why has the public servant come to
symbolize laziness and ineptitude?

Part of the explanation can be supplied, I believe, by examining the general attitudes toward
knowledge and expertise that have prevailed during this century. Science and analytical
techniques have become benchmarks for establishing the acceptability of various forms of
knowledge. Science relies on objectivity to produce results that are statistically significant
and therefore valid. With the growing value placed on expertise, however, has come an
increasing segregation between experts and nonexperts. Knowledge gained through the
subjective experience of everyday people – nonexperts – is not “valid,” because it is “tainted”
by personal bias. The practice of public administration has wholeheartedly embraced the idea
of the neutral expert. But in relying on objectivity, we have been guilty of perpetuating what
Yvonna Lincoln (1995) calls the voyeuristic gaze. In building the image of the professional
technocrat, we have become separated from our identities as concerned and involved citizens.
We have come to appear remote, disinterested, and unconnected with our fellow citizens –
therefore the attitude of my anonymous caller.

The purpose of this paper is to envision and describe a transformative practice of public
administration that reconnects the knowledge of expertise with the knowledge of experience.¹
It does so by combining technical proficiency with a normative foundation that values the
wisdom gained from common sense and personalized observation. Transformative public
administration allows the public service professional to function as a critical specialist who
recognizes that neutrality and objectivity have a dark and troublesome side. It is a practice of
“interested science” (Alway, 1995) that is conducted with the purpose of furthering a more
inclusive, substantively democratic polity.

Reconnecting the knowledge of expertise with the knowledge of experience

The emergence in this century of the “knowledge society” has had consequences that were
unanticipated by its initiators, many of whom (at least in the United States) were Pragmatists.
For them, science was to be the great equalizing force, contributing to the formation of a
democratic community. The unexpected result, however, has been the creation of a
knowledge elite increasingly concentrated in the hands of universities, corporations, and
government (Bell, 1974; Gaventa, 1993; Merrifield, 1993).

Membership in this knowledge elite is, in a sense, by invitation only – extended through the
confering of degrees, the acquisition of professional credentials, or the securing of other
forms of exclusive certification. Certain types of social controls govern the type of
knowledge produced and for whom, through the organization of academic disciplines, the
promulgation of professional standards, and incentives and reward structures for career
advancement. Knowledge is transmitted through the publication of professional journals,
participation in conferences, and membership in networks open only to those who are
members of the club. Additionally, much of this knowledge is passed along in language that
is unfamiliar to the uninitiated – the specialized jargon employed by different fields (Gaventa,
1993; Ricci, 1984).

In this environment, the experts become the power brokers. By choosing to offer or withhold
information, experts can manipulate the actions, or inactions, of others, controlling the
emergence of issues in the public arena. When issues do emerge, these experts can exercise tremendous discretion over how the issues are defined (Gaventa, 1980, 1993; Lukes, 1974). The effect is frequently to declare as a “nonissue” many of the problems encountered by everyday citizens. Furthermore, because the knowledge of expertise is segregated into disciplines, little attention is given to the cumulative or interactive effects of related issues. Gaventa (1993) writes:

Take, for instance, the case of a worker who is employed in a chemical plant, lives in a nearby community, eats and drinks the food and water from the land, and is dying of cancer. To gain a response from the system for action on the cause of the cancer, he or she will have to subdivide the problem into that derived from work, governed by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration or the Department of Labor; that derived from air pollution, governed by the air quality control board; that derived from water, governed by the Water Quality Control Board; that derived from toxins in the food, regulated by the Department of Agriculture; that derived from eating wildlife obtained through hunting, regulated by specialists in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife; that derived from the consumption of other foods, regulated by the Consumer Protection Agency; and that derived from the interactive effects of them all – regulated by no one. (p. 29)

Lived experience is a cumulative undertaking, but only the individual parts are examined by the experts, with no effort made to sum up the whole.

Expertise can be used to manipulate or perpetuate societal power relations. It can be used to “delay and defuse” an issue, as in doing a study that takes so long and produces such inconclusive results that the issue is abandoned. Expertise can be used to “impress and bemuse” – marshaling voluminous statistical evidence or sheer numbers of experts to overwhelm opponents. Finally expertise can be used to “gloss and confuse” an issue, basing political decisions on somewhat arbitrary standards that are presented as scientifically (read: objectively) valid. An example is the acceptable mercury level for fish, which had been set at 0.5 ppm (parts per million) until 1977, when, after lobbying by the tuna-fishing industry, the “safe” level for mercury in fish doubled to 1 ppm (Merrifield, 1993, pp. 74-75).

Even more problematic is the fact that, for the most part, knowledge experts are not accountable to those affected by the knowledge. This lack of accountability is rooted in the premise that scientific knowledge is superior because of its objectivity. Sharp distinctions are maintained between expertise – the study of a problem – and experience, or the subjective living of the problem. Experts may study the problems of poverty, homelessness, or inadequate prenatal care, but they must not experience these same problems, or identify with those who do, for fear of jeopardizing their objectivity. Information or knowledge that comes from personal experience is tainted with subjectivity and given little weight in official decision-making because it is not scientific. Belief in the authority of expertise subordinates common sense, and in so doing subordinates common people (Gaventa, 1993).

In addition, there is great reluctance on the part of knowledge experts to share information with the public, out of concern that ordinary people will not understand the information or will use it for partisan purposes in a manner that threatens the experts’ reputations for objectivity. Experts, like science itself, are supposed to be politically neutral. Having a professional obligation to describe only what is, and not what ought to be, allows the expert
to abdicate responsibility for expressing opinions or taking remedial action (Merrifield, 1993).

Public administration has been caught up in this culture of expertise, with detrimental effects. Public administration has become captivated by managerialism. The education and practice of public service professionals has become characterized by the mastery of instrumental analysis and technique, elevating process over purpose. The effect is to convince citizens that the substance of their concerns is unimportant, especially if those concerns cannot be expressed in the language of expertise. Administrators trained only in instrumental approaches and interpretations do not know how to question the effects of their actions on the lives of subordinate groups or to give weight to knowledge gained from lived experience.

Possibilities for a transformative practice of public administration

My experiences in the capacities of public service professional, public administration academician, and politically aware citizen have led me to the conclusion that, in order to reconnect with citizens, the study and practice of public administration must leave behind the arrogance of expertise. We must have the courage to step away from the comfortable (and comforting) identity as managers, administrators, and neutral efficiency experts and be open to the knowledge that lived experience provides. By combining training in instrumental techniques with a normative foundation that emphasizes the rectification of historical and political conditions of inequality, critically-minded public administrators can use their unique position to act as transformative agents of change.

The call for transformative public administration is predicated on the assumption that the bureaucracy does not necessarily equal the state. Those on the left have in the past committed the instrumental reductions of “law equals state” (see Hunt, 1993) and, less explicitly, public bureaucracy equals state – a questionable leap (Ventriss, 1987). The literature on administrative discretion, however, amply illustrates that public servants are not of singular mind or unified action. In many instances, administrators are required to make judgment calls based on their own interpretation of the proper ends (as well as means) of a given administrative action or policy initiative. Recognition of the legitimacy and acceptability of administrative discretion provides a foundation for transformative action.

The phrasing “transformative administrator” is suggested by Guba and Lincoln’s (1994) discussion of critical research approaches (see also Giroux, 1988). In describing the critical perspective, Guba and Lincoln note that it is informed by historical realism, an approach that views reality as shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender considerations that ossified over time and are now, mistakenly, assumed to be fixed. These structures have become a kind of virtual reality. But it if these conditions are uncovered and recognized as malleable influences, they can be changed.

A critical perspective seeks restitution for historical wrongs and emancipation for individuals that are trapped by these ossified societal structures. There is a moral tilt toward revelation and the erosion of ignorance, incorporating values of empowerment and altruism and combining them with a stimulus to action. The critical perspective requires a transformative intellectual to act as advocate and activist, and, interestingly, demands a kind of resocialization – the understanding and mastery of quantitative analytical techniques utilized confrontationally, for transformative purposes (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).
Inspirations for the transformative administrator can be found within Gramsci’s (1971) theory of the intellectual, helpfully explicated by Holub (1992). In Holub’s analysis, Gramsci envisioned four primary categories of intellectual. The first, which Holub calls the “traditional intellectual,” includes the public figures, academics, doctors, teachers, artists, publishers, professionals, and semiprofessionals that represent the dominant class. This category takes into account the nonneutrality of ideas and knowledge and the political role of certain intellectuals in disseminating and validating the status quo (hegemonic condition). The second category includes Gramsci’s “organic intellectual,” which Holub separates into “new intellectuals” and “critical specialists.” Gramsci spoke of the organic intellectual to represent the bearers of knowledge that emerge from every major social and economic formation. Holub’s new intellectual is a specialist, a technocrat who understands his or her role in isolation but not the interconnections between other elements of complex systems. The critical specialist, by contrast, understands that his or her activity is partial and connected to other activities in a larger social, political, and economic system (Holub, 1992).

Gramsci also referred to the ability of every individual to understand and participate in the exchange of social ideas – what Holub terms the “universal intellectual.” Finally, Gramsci discusses the ability of certain groups to mediate between the dominant and subordinate classes. Holub terms this the “structure of feeling,” or the “intellectual community.” The interaction of this mediating group between the dominant and subordinate classes can reinforce a single world-view and be used to perpetuate hegemony, as in the case of traditional intellectuals. However, there is also the possibility that dialogic/dialectic interchange can be a factor in the production of a counterhegemony, where the articulation of alternative views is nurtured, validated, and encouraged (Holub, 1992).

A transformative administrator is one who accepts certain assumptions about politics and knowledge. First, s/he recognizes that thought and ideas are fundamentally influenced by power relations that are socially and historically constituted. That is, the dominant characteristics of Western culture, which are to privilege certain races, classes, and genders, are human constructions that have been built over centuries of uncritical acceptance. But they are neither revealed truth, nor immutable reality, and they can be challenged and changed. Privileged groups retain that status because they have convinced the less-privileged that inequality is the way of the world, and that it is futile to protest or challenge it.

Second, s/he understands that facts cannot be isolated from values or normative assessments of the world. Because we cannot simply observe the world, but instead continually interact with and influence it, our values and experiences color our observations. When we are aware of these influences, we can act to correct certain tendencies – such as the tendency to accept the superiority of expert knowledge in all instances.

Third, and administrator working from a transformative perspective recognizes the potential for all citizens to be democratic philosophers. This is the essence of Gramsci’s “organic intellectual” – people whose lived experience combines with their awareness of how political, social, and economic structures contribute to inequality and marginalization. Organic intellectuals are important because they do not simply describe social life from the “outside.” Instead, they can use the language of a culture to express feelings and experiences that others find hard to articulate for themselves (Kolakowski, 1978). Gramsci (1971) wrote:

Each man [sic], finally, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a “philosopher,” an artist, a man of taste, he
participates in a particular conception of the world, and has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.

In other words, each individual has the choice to draw on his or her experiences either to substantiate the status quo or to recognize the contradictions and work to resolve them by creating new ways of thinking about the world and putting those new modes of thought into being.

Finally, a transformative administrator has come to appreciate how mainstream research and policy-making has the effect (if not always the explicit intention) of reproducing and reinforcing the conditions of the status quo (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). Critically enlightened and sympathetic administrators can play a crucial role by providing the administrative access necessary to bring about change based on experience as well as expertise. They can act as interpreters and facilitators, but they can also act as transformative agents by educating citizens about how to articulate concerns, voice needs, and implement community-developed strategies for change.

Administrators trained only in instrumental approaches and interpretations do not know how to question the effects of their actions on the lives of subordinate groups or give weight to the knowledge gained from experience. An administrator who functions as a new intellectual will be incapable of recognizing or realizing the possibilities for transformation. But administrators who function as critical specialists, who recognize that they are a part of a larger system of ideological tensions, and who can provide the mediating function that encourages counterhegemonic change, can serve as agents for transformation.

**Precedents in law and education**

How does one apply the philosophies and precepts of critical theory to the practice of public administration? After all, public administration is the study of the manner in which the will of the state is carried out by the administrative apparatus. Where is there room for radical theory? I suggest that those engaged in the theory and practice of public administration might learn from developments in both law and education, both of which contain important public-sector components.

Radical approaches to pedagogy have been emergent in the field of education for some time (see, generally, the work of Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux, among many others). In this context, the distinction is made between domesticating and liberating educational processes. Domesticating education is used to perpetuate and reinforce current social values and conditions. Liberating education, by contrast, refers to the means by which individuals address social conditions critically and creatively in order to participate in the transformation of their environment (Mayo, 1999).

Similarly, supporters of a critical theory approach to law have recognized a need to become more creative in their strategies for social justice. The practice of “critical lawyering” has emerged as a partial solution. Proponents of this approach suggest that the law might become a means for deepening the political consciousness of subordinated groups (White, 1987-88). In other words, the legal process can be used, not just to function within the game rules of the liberal framework, but to effect transformational change.
Critical legal theory argues that the liberal conception of law as constraining governmental power and protecting citizens from intolerance and oppression is logically incoherent. In particular, critical legal theorists attack the rule of law on grounds that contemporary legal doctrines are beset with contradictions, pairs of fundamentally incompatible norms serving as authoritative elements of legal doctrine in virtually all departments of law. This is the situation that allows lawyers and judges, in most cases, to argue either side of a case equally well, depending on which of the contradictory norms they relay on. Furthermore, the comfortable fiction of the rule of law allows society to perpetuate illegitimate relations of power. The perceived legitimacy of the law confers a broader legitimacy on the social system as a whole, and conceals the domination and coercion that are inherent. To conceive of the law as an entity capable of constraining the exercise of social and political power is to adopt a form of fetishism – that is, to regard a human creation as if it were capable of controlling humans, reducing their human agency and making them slaves when in fact they should be masters (Kairys, 1982; Altman, 1990).

However, critical legal studies was criticized for offering too much “talking” with not enough “doing” of law, and for providing insufficient alternatives to traditional public interest law, which places faith in the available policy solutions (for example, the U.S. War on Poverty), reliance on procedural strategies to attain benefits for the socially marginalized, and the effectiveness of advocacy in traditional arenas (such as the litigation strategy that produced the successful outcome in the U.S. desegregation case, Brown v. Board of Education). Public interest law initially was viewed as a means to correct the deficiencies of the legal “marketplace” and to legitimize the welfare state by providing opportunities for otherwise-unrepresented groups to be heard. The emphasis was on process-oriented responses to social inequities, and this approach relied on the assumption that advocacy in traditional legal forums, particularly in the courts, could bring about change. Challenges were framed in terms of the “rights” of marginalized groups to establish claims to social goods (Buchanan & Trubek, 1992).

In the United States in 1960s and 1970s, impact litigation became a powerful instrument for welfare reform. It focused on changing institutional norms or practices rather than resolving individual problems. Litigation was typically controlled by specialists working out of centralized locations (usually federally-funded public interest law offices), and often the individuals named as plaintiffs in these cases had little contact with lawyers or involvement in the suit after their complaints were filed and depositions taken. In times when the courts are receptive to claims of distributive justice, impact litigation can result in court orders that transfer funds or coerce institutional changes (Zanetti, 1997).

With the public funding cutbacks of the 1980s, however, such sweeping lawsuits became much more difficult to mount (White, 1987-88). There was also a growing understanding of the paternalistic, dependency-inducing effects of traditional advocacy approaches. Supporters of public interest law recognized a need to become more creative in their approaches to social justice, and “critical lawyering” was the solution they hit upon. These proponents of change suggested that the law might become a means for deepening the political consciousness of marginalized groups.

With critical lawyering, critical legal theory is used to provide insight into the nature of client disempowerment and to politicize the legal process toward the goal of substantive equality. But critical lawyering also includes an active component, a participatory-educative approach that involves the client group in framing the question, developing strategy for change,
learning how to use the system to effect change, and obtaining skills that can be used in future. Importantly, it also helps dissolve the unequal power relations in the legal arena and joins the knowledge of experts with that of the laity. It is a means for giving the socially marginalized the ability ad the right to speak for themselves (Buchanan & Trubek, 1992; Tremblay, 1990; White, 1987-88).

The example of critical lawyering is particularly applicable to public administration for several reasons. First, both law and public administration face a similar duality of theory and practice. Both fields must ultimately reconcile academic theory with actions by practitioners. Second, law and public administration share the function of serving as legitimizing agents for the state. Both lawyers and public servants take oaths and both professions have shared reformist tendencies at different points in this century. Finally the genesis of the critical perspective in both fields was similar, involving a rejection of the prevailing combination of philosophical liberalism and instrumentalism. Success in using the legal process to effect transformational change holds promise for using the administrative process in a similar fashion.

**Implications of a transformative practice of public administration**

The goal of advocating a transformative practice of public administration is to carve out opportunities to achieve fundamental changes in the perception of knowledge, and its reflection in administrative practice, in very localized settings. For example, it is an approach that may initially be more feasible in state or local agencies that deal more directly with citizens on issues that touch their lives directly – delivery of prenatal care services to low income citizens, for example, rather than more macro-issues of international trade balances.

The applicability to more localized settings is based on several lines of reasoning. First, Gramsci (1971, 1985) argued that successful societal change could only take place if it moved up from the people in a number of segments of society. Gramsci noted that transformative change must take place throughout all segments of civil society before being put into place at the level of national governmental structures. Administrators function to keep equilibrium between state and civil society. They represent the state, yet are the living, breathing point of contact between citizen and government. Street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky, 1980/1992), in particular, are often called on to make judgmental decisions regarding the intent, purpose, and interpretation of legal statues. This pivotal positioning means that the administrator can serve an important bridge function between elitist or potentially authoritarian approaches and the fragmentary relativism of radical pluralism (Carroll & Ratner, 1994). More macro-level applications would be expected to come later, after critical-transformative collaborations have produced democratic, workable solutions. It is a filter-up, rather than a trickle-down approach.

Transformative practice is one that begins with people’s lived experiences. Its method is to ask citizens to compare the platitudes fed to them by elites – such as “all men [sic] are created equal” and “ours is the land of opportunity” – with the realities of their own lives. Do they feel equal? Is there opportunity to earn a living wage? As individuals begin to recognize the contradictions between their lived experiences and the picture presented to them by elites, they become inspired to resolve these contradictions by demanding change and devising their own strategies for the accomplishment of that change.
The role of the administrator in a transformative practice is to provide spaces for the disillusioned to speak and draw on the meanings they derive from their experiences. It is not an arrangement in which the administrator presumes to know the final answer. It is not the methodical production of facts; it is the mediation between the “is” and the “ought.” Administrators trained only in technical approaches may recognize tensions and contradictions but do not know how to resolve them.

Administrators who can function as critical specialists, however, are able not only to listen, reflect, and engage in discourse, but also to make space for action that results from new modes of thought. Such an approach allows all of us to speak in ways that are the most meaningful to us – music, art, poetry, skits, drama, stories. The appreciation of the everyday is genuine.

The administrator is just one element of society that contributes to change. As a proposal for building a public administration to help overcome the estrangement many citizens now feel from “their” government, the transformative practice of public administration is an overall approach that can be relevant in a variety of venues. Such a practice, however, will require administrators (and academicians) to take a very different view of their mission as public servants. Administrators, in particular, will have to walk a fine line in balancing their critical social visions with their legal-political obligations. I suspect it will be uncomfortable at times, as we seek to relinquish the status of our expertise. Yet this discomfort is precisely what will yield the new insights (see Carr & Zanetti, 1997 on the estrangement effect and dialectic).

Public administration is composed of many tensions and contradictions, as I noted at the opening of this paper. These tensions can be a source of destructive tendencies that perpetuate the estrangement of citizens from government. But the contradictions can be used constructively, as well. By aiming for synthesis – of academic and practitioner efforts, of citizen and administrator, of trends and stories, of expertise and experience – a more integrated, connected, and substantively democratic practice of public administration might be achieved. Operating “at the nexus,” the purpose of a transformative practice of public administration is to draw on the wisdom of the everyday democratic philosopher that resides in all of us.
References


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1 A version of this argument was published as “At the Nexus of State and Civil Society,” in C. King and C. Stivers (Eds.), *Government is Us: Public Administration in an Anti-Government Age* (Sage, 1998), pp. 102-121.