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Reflections on the “Hollowing Out of Public Administration”

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I am grateful for the opportunity to comment on Robert Durant and David Rosenbloom's (2016) thought-provoking article, “The Hollowing of American Public Administration.” In this paper, they revisit a long-standing question in public administration: “why public administration seems unable to develop a more substantial and satisfactory theoretical, explanatory, and practical body of knowledge” (p. 1). Their formulation puts the theory-to-practice problem front and center for the field. In their view, however, the struggle to make headway on theory-to-practice front is symptomatic of a more basic dilemma. This is the “hollowing out” of public administration, or the “narrowing of the substantive (topical), normative, and methodological focus of the field”<sup>1</sup> which they attribute to “conceptually weak and decontextualized normative pillars” and “problematic macro-dynamic foundations” (p. 2).<sup>2</sup>

This leaves us with “inadequate scaffolding for integrating the field’s disparate research narratives for understanding by scholars, practitioners, and students alike” (p. 2). The paper, then, aims to provide a “common framework for organizing research, one that has meaning for researchers and practitioners alike and that can be a talisman for dialogue within and between the two groups” (p. 16). Their framework is organized around “six administrative challenges that practitioners recognize today and that are likely to continue into the future.” These can be used to organize the field’s existing research and connect different communities. The scaffolding promises a “common aspirational ethos” without a “central directing authority or hierarchy of methodologies” (p. 19).

In these brief comments, I address some of the important matters raised in the paper but, ultimately, propose another way to understanding our mutual concerns.

### **A Big Tent Public Administration?**

Above all, I appreciate the paper’s aim to map the terrain of the field in such a way that researchers with quite different epistemologies, methodologies, and interests may see themselves as having a common home. In this regard, the paper joins other important

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discussions about pluralism in public administration research such as David Farmer's *The Language of Public Administration* (1995) and *Public Administration in Perspective* (2010), Norma Riccucci's (2010) *Public Administration: Traditions of Inquiry and Philosophies of Knowledge*, and Jos Raadschelders' (2011) *Public Administration: The Interdisciplinary Study of Government*. Durant and Rosenbloom's approach to pluralism in the paper appears distinctive in being oriented around the perspective of practitioners and the demand that research itself be viewed through the prism of its utility and relevance for practitioners. Again, I appreciate the ethos of pluralism but the paper's basic approach to this matter is problematic.

Central to the article is the thesis that the field of public administration has "inadequate scaffolding" for integrating its many subfields and questions; the field lacks a "common framework for organizing research." They claim that they construct their new scaffolding without a hierarchy. I am so convinced. Notwithstanding the obvious effort to be extensive if not exhaustive in inventorying the contemporary research of the field, they nevertheless adopt what Raadschelders (2011) would call a "top-down" approach to articulating a vision and agenda for the field.

First, a privileged agenda is defined. It is privileged less in terms of the array of topics and questions they outline than in the very goal of "disciplinary coherence." This move sticks to a long tradition that holds clarity and clarification of the aims and scope of research as the key to resolving the field's various and varied deficiencies. They argue that this is needed because "public administration lacks a firm common framework for organizing research, one that has meaning to researchers and practitioners alike and that can be a talisman for dialogue within and between two groups" (p. 16). However the paper does not give any argument as to why this framework will succeed where others have not. Indeed a great many efforts have been made over the last half-century to integrate the field and/or provide a unifying paradigm or concept for public administration. While some may have provided guidance within certain subfields or inspired research programs, the track record here is certainly not promising.

Nor is such a unified program normatively desirable in my view. I would like us, rather, to begin accept the reality of disciplinary fragmentation and epistemic pluralism. As Raadschelders (2011) discusses, the evolution of social science is towards more not less fragmentation; so is the broader social world. I will say more in a moment about how we can work with this.

The scaffolding, second and more fundamentally, reflects a privileged agenda in its demand that the field be *practitioner-centric*<sup>3</sup>. I have written at length about the problems of putting the practitioner, relevance, or practice at center of the academic field (Catlaw, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Denhardt & Catlaw, 2014). The crux of the argument is that evoking "the practitioner" is to rely on an abstracted notion of practice that effaces the particular qualities, contexts, desires, and problems of actually existing practitioners, and

the more public administration *appears to fail* to serve The Practitioner, the stronger the demand to focus on his abstracted needs, the less "theoretical" or "impractical" concerns are tolerated. Yet the abstract construction of Practitioner "needs" continues to drive and condition the products that the public administration academic should or

ought to produce. The upshot is that “the useful” has little chance to be more than a happenstance coincidence of product and consumer. . . (p. 195)

In this light, I also don’t agree that the theory-practice problem is a central problem; actually I don’t even think that, framed as it is in the piece, it’s actually a problem at all. My view is that we do not have a theory to practice problem but what we have are *different fields of practice* that aspire to but have difficulties communicating with one another.

I understand “field” here following the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1985, 1989, 1994, 2005). A social field consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power or what Bourdieu calls capitals. A field’s objectivity is the certain *force* impressed on those in it by virtue of the configuration of the various living people present and the given arrangement of positions that are opened and occupied. The particular configuration of a field helps to explain why certain things are more likely to occur than others, why there is a semi-permanence or stability to social settings. Any particular social setting or institution can be understood as a field wherein certain kinds of practices and positions are available (see Catlaw & Hu, 2009, p. for an application of field theory to public administration).

I would argue that we should just accept that different fields of practice are represented, broadly, by the academy and professional administrative work; to say nothing of the heterogeneity of concrete, local fields of practice in specific agencies and universities or the ways in which singular individuals intersect with them. From this vantage, the challenge becomes not making research matter to practitioners or moving theory to practice but creating new fields in which academic and public administrative practitioners can better communicate and exchange knowledge. We can let academics be academics and professional public administrators be administrators without instrumentalizing academic knowledge production to the abstract ends of “the practitioner.”

I recognize that Durant and Rosenblooms’ framework reflects this field-building spirit to some extent; sketching a way to connect not only the subfields of the academy, but also the domains of professional and academic practice. But, again, as it is set up in the paper, there persists an implicit hierarchy of fields of practice in which the academic field basically serves the instrumental needs of the professional one; the latter defines the aims of the former. In turn, this suggests to me that the organization and hierarchy within the field is essentially structured around the ability to make a case for the practical utility of research. Indeed this impulse is fully operative in the piece: The justification for this research is, essentially, that by not doing historical or other kinds of research, we are missing out on its applications for professional practice.

When I make this line of argument I am sometimes criticized for endorsing an ivory tower detachment and disregard for “making social science matter” (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Neither is the case. I think, simply, that we would be better off finding ways to build new institutional pathways and networks that link research and professional administrative practice rather than insisting that researchers begin, a priori, by seeking to produce research that “the practitioner” finds useful to her work. I offer two ideas on how to do this.

One, we put academics into governmental agencies on details or as academics/scholars in residence so that informal, everyday relationships can be built between the two fields of practice, and academics can learn on the ground about the construction of particular professional fields and work with people there to surface problems and leverage academic research. It could be viewed as a kind of ongoing action research program. Two, we build and invest in new institutional arrangements to connect universities and governments. There are many such centers and institutes that try to do this but I want to comment on a particularly interesting new model being developed in the “Project Cities: Sustainability Through Local Action” initiative at Arizona State University’s Social of Sustainability (<https://sustainability.asu.edu/sustainable-cities/project-cities/>).

Project Cities aims to work, upfront, with city and county governments to identify potential projects that faculty and students can collaborate on. This departs from the typically haphazard, protracted way in which researchers and governments typically find one another. Here, projects have already been identified and proposed, and faculty can opt-in depending on their time, interests, and expertise. The staff of Project Cities encourages the projects to be embedded in classrooms so that students gain experience and faculty can leverage the class as a research team.

In sum, we should address the “theory to practice” problem more productively by reframing it as field-building problem between *different fields of practice*. From there, we should seek new institutions and pathways to connect academic research and professional public administration. We should decenter from “the practitioner” from the field, let go of the need for an integrated discipline, and set aside the a priori demand that academic knowledge be instrumentalized.

### **A Place for “Theory”?**

While the authors briefly touch on these concerns (p. 2) and I anticipate an encouraging reply, I would benefit from a more explicit discussion about the implications of this demand for practitioner utility for their effort to be epistemologically and methodologically inclusive. I ask this from the vantage of my own position as a scholar who conducts critical analytical scholarship in the tradition of the theoretical humanities; work represented more broadly by the Public Administration Theory Network. I understand the theoretical humanities as “the productive nexus of work in the disciplinary fields of literary criticism and theory, philosophy, and cultural studies” (from *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*).

In the closing of the paper, Durant and Rosenbloom say that their “aim has been to raise the consciousness of the field to what hollowing out is doing to our ability to address with empirical fidelity important issues in public administration” (p. 19). At a moment during which fake news and alternative facts are causing understandable consternation, this may be inauspicious moment to ask, but: What does *empirical validity* mean here? Is there room for the theoretical humanities (p. 19)?

A more proximate locus for this question would be in the discussion of normative pillars. The paper’s main criticism of research on equity and efficiency—in addition to its limited quantity—

seems to be the failure for these concepts to be appropriately operationalized and that this failure entails a concomitant failure for them to serve as guide for action. However there is a different, more humanistic, theoretical approach to these matters that does not worry so much about operationalization as *sine qua non* for informed action. By way of contrast, a scientific approach might say that *science* aims at facts that can resolve the ambiguity at the heart of our understanding social equity and efficiency to enable sound action. In a more humanistic or discourse approach, following Stivers (2000), it is the very ongoing conversation about values and concepts like “equity” and “efficiency” that constitutes the ends. The point is to keep a conversation about these terms—as well as democracy and public administration—going. This is another way to view the work of academic inquiry (Stivers, 2008).

And we do indeed need to build what Stivers calls “working relationships” with other academics as well as the worlds of professional public administration for such a conversation to get going. In the end—again—I think these relationships will get off to a better start if we don’t begin with a top-down vision or implicit seating of the practitioner at the head of the table.

### **Time for Historical Thinking?**

Another key dimension of Durant and Rosenbloom’s argument is the need for a deeper historical sensibility or awareness of history. We need to “take time seriously.” On this point, I share their sense of bewilderment that the growing literature in American Political Development (APD) (see Novak, 2008 for an excellent overview) remains so peripheral to public administration (Durant, 2014). Among its many virtues, this scholarship offers a powerful counter-narrative to the mythology of the “stateless” nineteenth century that to some degree sustains both academic public administration and anti-government political ideologues. This scholarship is unsettling. But for their part, Durant and Rosenbloom seem to want to fuse aspects the “Old” Institutionalism and developmental historicism with modernist, positivist social science (Bevir, 2010, 2013). The rhythms and processes of history appear to merely supplement the predictive power of statistical modeling. It is not a strategy that sits so easily with me. As suggested already, my pitch would be for the field encourage a turn towards a truly radical contextualism that embraces the contingencies of local reasoning and epistemic pluralism (Bevir, 2010).

I would add, too, that there is a difference between calling attention to the relevance of history and raising the question of *historicity* (*Geschichtlichkeit*), or the view that phenomena are fully artifacts of socio-historical practice and tradition, within and against which those artifacts take on meaning and significance. On this point, Paul Ricoeur tellingly writes, apropos of the work of theory, “the philosopher’s contribution [to the dialogue with the historian] lies here in the critique directed against a treatment of the past in terms of a tool, an utensil” (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 377). As I discussed above, on my reading “history matters” in their framework essentially on instrumentalist grounds; it helps “the practitioner.” Yet to pose the problem of historicity is to inquire into the historical conditions that prompt questions, dilemmas, and narratives themselves. In closing, then, let me offer one possible account of the problem of “hollowing

out” and its neglect of history. Here, I think Durant and Rosenbloom’s charge to take time seriously assumes particular urgency.

### **Research under Conditions Academic Capitalism**

Perhaps most important, provocative aspect of the article concerns its argument about “how and why consideration of history, culture, and administrative processes have been marginalized by perverse methodological and professional incentives in public administration” (p. 20). Though they do not get into much detail about these incentives in this paper, elsewhere Durant (2016) does a fine job outlining them. He observes, for example, the growing emphasis on econometrics as the primary route for building scholarly reputations and quickly building a pipeline of manuscripts and publications; an emphasis on articles rather than books; preoccupation with quantifiable impact factors and citations; myriad pressures for grants. For Durant and Rosenbloom these perverse incentives contribute to the neglect of the big questions and historical and normative empirical inquiry. And to put a fine point on it: The consequences for humanistic inquiry are far direr.

But to really make sense of these incentives and the problem of hollowing, we need to put these issues more explicitly in—yes—the context of the neoliberalizing contemporary American university. Gary Marshall (2016) in public administration has written lucidly on this. He argues that public administration has yet to make explicit sense of the role of academic work in the new knowledge economy. Here the boundary between “public and private in the process of knowledge production” is fading fast under pressures from what has been called “academic capitalism.” This reflects the impact of market-based ideas on the university and the growing tension between the production of commodities for market and the traditional symbolic products of intellectual labor. Not only professional education but education *tout court* is viewed increasingly within the frame of human capital development and job-related instrumental payoffs. Academics are called on to justify themselves in terms of their ability to deliver skills to the ends of human and financial capital development. Institutionally, new infrastructure, knowledge regimes, performance and audits systems, and models for academic work are rapidly consolidating their hold as universities look to enhance and position themselves as “brands” in the competitive global market for students and investment. All work is poised to be instrumentalized to these ends.

So the incentives that are driving out the kind historical and normative work Durant and Rosenbloom call for—a call I support with the caveats noted above—are largely a function of the same neoliberal managerialist practices that have long reigned and been advocated in public administration under the auspices of the new public management and, now, collaborative management<sup>4</sup>. The same practices that have served to “hollow out” the professional fields of the administrative state (Milward, 2000) are now doing the same to the academic field. We have been hoisted on our own proverbial petard.

It is this context we should add further caution viz. a preoccupation with practical utility. It is a demand that resonates deeply with and reinforces harangues from legislatures, university administrators, and members of the public who are skeptical of academic work that does not

seem to have immediate cash pay off in terms of preparation for the work force, economic development, or enhancing of the university brand.

### **Taking Time Seriously**

But what is happening in neoliberalizing universities and public sector workplaces today is not a merely a rote repetition of the instrumentality or technicism that has characterized public administration for much of its self-conscious disciplinary existence (McSwite, 1997). Rather, in focusing our gaze on the university and the bureaucracy, we can discern that the demand for instrumentality is now shaped by a very different historical horizon.

Historian Francois Hartog (2015/2013) calls this new horizon a *regime of historicity* called *presentism*. By presentism, Hartog does not mean the tendency to view the past through the prism of the present but rather the contemporary *eclipse* of the past and the future by the present itself. Within the regime of presentism, it is not just that what is valued is valued for its instrumental payoff but that that value is assessed in terms of the *immediacy* of its application. As he concludes, we live in a “world governed solely by an omnipresent and omnipotent present, in which immediacy alone has value” (p. xviii).

Today’s universities are driven by the same short-term temporal horizons as Wall Street traders; demanding, for example, instant ROIs from graduate students and untenured faculty, where “apprenticeships” were once the norm. There is, in any case, no time to train these people since professors are busy and under their own performance pressures. Hollowed out governments are driven by comparable market reasoning and the demand to deliver “public value” now to their customers. There is no patience for bureaucratic time.

On the one hand, we might applaud the growing reticence to sacrifice the present on the altar of the future. And let’s not indulge in nostalgia. Public administration has been more than happy to sacrifice the present for the future: To clear “slums” and displace communities in the interests of what Waldo (1948) saw as the advance of “urban civilization.” But as I have suggested here, on the other hand, there are consequences of the closure of the future and the reign of presentism, not the least of which is the hollowing out of public administration.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> They suggest that two of the most prominent contenders among the *normative pillars* to ground the field, efficiency and equity,

have a long way to go before these values can be functionally foundational for the field, as well as resonate with practitioners. Scholarship cries out for greater conceptual clarity, empirical research, and normative analyses. It also begs for operationalization of values using different epistemologies, as well as studies of processes involved in making value trade-offs. Moreover, these must be linked to how history, context, and contingencies affect the choice of values, if researchers are to produce valid theory that can also advance practice by gaining relevance and credibility with practitioners. (p. 9)

<sup>2</sup> By *problematic macro-foundations*, Durant and Rosenbloom mean the “marginalization of historical, constitutional, and legal contexts,” of cultural context, and the study of processes (10). They argue that the “big questions” situating public administration within the broader historical development of the American political economy—long ago at heart of the field—are now neglected. Legal, historical, and process based analyses are abandoned in favor of largely quantitative, cross-sectional outcomes oriented analyses (pp. 11, 15). This all contributes to an overly rosy misrecognition of the field’s “stateless” origins and its often ill-liberal legacies as well the failure to generate relevant insights for both research and practice.

<sup>3</sup> Raadschelders (2011) would locate this demand within one of four traditions of public administrative research.

<sup>4</sup> There is not space to make the larger argument about the move from new public management to collaboration. However, Peck and Tickell (2006) have shown the two major ways in the neoliberalization of the state have been a “roll back” stage in which new public management types of management prevailed to a “roll out” stage in which networks, collaboration, and social capital emerge as figurative discourses and practices to manage the disorder of the roll back stage.