

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, PUBLIC SOCIOLOGY, AND SOCIAL
LIFE: TOWARD A NEW INTELLECTUALITY
FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

by

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON

August 2006

UMI Number: 3229560

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

More than anyone I know, Ben Agger lives what he writes. Without that knowledge it would have been impossible to write two chapters based in his work. He never once recommended that I read anything that he has written. When I read it and interpreted it anyway, he never disciplined my text. He is also so humble that it is nearly impossible to thank him. The only thing to do with my gratitude is write!

My committee, Enid Arvidson, Rod Hissong, Jeff Howard, and Sherman Wyman, embraced interdisciplinary scholarship and heterodoxy, which allowed me to write freely. They provided a safe space within which I could write, even when they didn't agree with me. My thanks to all of them for being there when things went wrong and for being funny, instead of condescending, when I only thought that things were going wrong.

My thanks to my husband, Ed Nickel, and to my boss and friend, Cheryl Cardell, who jointly “funded” this dissertation when no one else would! The Center for Theory at the University of Texas at Arlington provided me with intellectual support. My thanks to Joanna Duke for starting and finishing with me and for gently entertaining and then stoutly rejecting every doubt that I had. Finally, my thanks to Joseph Kable, who has been supporting my academic pursuits since high school Chemistry class and whose academic career, a rare blend of hard science, intellectual curiosity, and concern for social justice, inspired this dissertation.

May 10, 2006

ABSTRACT

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Publication No. _____

Patricia M. Nickel, PhD.

The University of Texas at Arlington, 2006

Supervising Professor: Ben Agger

This dissertation is an exploration of a new intellectuality for public administration. I extend Ben Agger's question, "Can intellectuals be reborn as guardians of democracy and community?" to the public administration community, concluding that public administration must re-write its relationship with the reified state and in anticipation of social life. The dissertation is divided into two parts. First, I begin by deconstructing public administration's legitimacy question through varying theories of the state in order to demonstrate that public administration has thus far only defended the state. The point is to shift the ontology of public administration from the state to the social, creating a space for critique as the foundation of a democratic state. I then attempt to recover the excluded public, in contrast to the logic of liberalism, as a

“legitimate” source of knowledge. Through a deconstruction of the conflict between intellectuals and the state in late capitalism, in Part Two I open a space for imagining an alternative intellectuality for public administration based in public sociology.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Public administration scholars have seemingly advocated a democratic public sphere for over 100 years. Despite this tradition, commodification continues to dominate the practice of public administration and the academic careers of the very scholars who defend the public sphere. This domination takes place at the expense of social life as it pits the understanding of the citizen as a social being against the understanding of the citizen as consumer. My central concern in this dissertation is thus the intersection of the state, the intellectual, and social life. I will attempt to provide a possible answer to the question: what sort of intellectuality would foster an intellectual relationship between public administration and actually existing democracy (Fraser 1992)?

The dissertation is divided into two parts. First, I begin by reviewing critical theories of the state and their explanation of the state's creation of meaning. I argue that public administration scholarship has failed to recognize its role in stabilizing the social order because it has thus far failed to recognize the politics of knowledge (Apple 2003). In Part II I attempt to reconstruct the public sphere via Ben Agger's (2000) notion of public sociology, thereby re-grounding public administration as public intellectuality in relationship with social life. I will begin here by laying out and providing initial support for the general thesis, which will inform a more detailed reading in the following chapters.

1.1 Methodological Considerations

How we discuss public administration depends upon our underlying assumptions about knowledge and the state. It also depends on our assumptions about the purity of the relationship between research and truth. I am not particularly concerned with how my methodology is identified; methodological categorization tends to hide the author behind a screen of supposed rationality and trap her work in the battle for academic legitimacy, rather than letting it speak for itself. It is therefore less important for me to classify myself and more important that I share my assumptions with the reader and explain what it is that I seek to accomplish. My concern here is with the excluded public and the possibility for public administration to play a role in the eradication of this exclusion. I am writing from the assumption that public administration, as it currently exists in relationship to the public and to the state, reproduces domination and prevents social transformation. Therefore, I will discuss public administration as a critical social theorist, meaning that I view public administration as a possible space for the transformation of social life.

While I will draw broadly from critical social theory, as well as poststructural theory and postmodern theory as they contribute to critical social theory, there are four key concepts that I will draw on in order to help uncover the barriers to understanding the possibility of democratic social life: public and social life, commodification, ideology, and literary political economy. I employ these four concepts specifically because they address my understanding of the interrelationship between the state, the intellectual, culture, and the public, as well as the possibility for transforming this

relationship. It is these interrelationships and their trappings that underlie the relationship that I am concerned with; the relationship between the state, public administration, the intellectual in the university, and the public.

Only rarely have these theories have been specifically explored in relationship to public administration from *within* the public administration literature. Even where they are explored, they are explored outside of the mainstream. Hence the reader of this dissertation may not be familiar with the theoretical perspective employed here. This lack of understanding of critical social theory within public administration is a secondary issue in this dissertation because it speaks to the failure of the field to open a space for critique.ⁱ At the same time, critical social theory can be dense and difficult to understand, even as it attempts to motivate the public (Agger 1992a).

I am attempting to overcome both of these barriers to discourse and so, while these four concepts will be integrated in later chapters, I will provide a brief overview here because they are central to my thesis and provide context for the following outline and because I want the reader to be fully comfortable with my own understanding of the broad concepts before approaching the substantive ideas that they inform. The following discussion of these terms is not meant to be a scholarly grounding of the concepts. My discussion of these concepts here is a methodological approach meant to demonstrate for the reader how my own interaction with these concepts influences the rest of the text. It is a genealogy of my own intellectual approach to public administration. The following, of course, is my own reading of these theorists; I draw

from each of them specifically to the extent that they help me to understand the current state of public administration and social life.

I suspect that one reason that mainstream public administration literature has largely ignored critical social theoryⁱⁱ is that critical social theory has suffered commodification to the extent that terms that once conveyed meaning are now easily dismissed (Agger 1989). Marx, in particular, is vulnerable to this loss of meaning. Nearly everyone who has passed an undergraduate sociology course is able to use “false consciousness” or “dictatorship of the proletariat” in a sentence without having ever read Marx. Thus, the terms are easily dismissed as passé, or politically dangerous by virtue of their distortion as “evil” in order to protect dominant ideologies, without ever being fully considered; they have taken on a meaning(lessness) completely independent of *readings of the text* from which they originated.ⁱⁱⁱ

I therefore go to some length here to explain, not what the terms mean (I could not identify a definite meaning) but rather how my own reading of these theorists informs my understanding of public administration and social life. Building on Agger’s (1992) lifeworld-grounded critical theory, “a critical theory that begins with everyday experience and discourse, including its own” (278), I intentionally avoid the exegesis of these theorists so that they might actually inspire public administration. Thus, I employ Agger’s (1992) criticism of the academization of critical social theory (279) as a methodology for the incorporation of critical social theory in public administration.

I choose this method because I advocate critical social theory as a means to inform public administration’s understanding of itself. I grant the reader of Marx the

freedom to be inspired, whatever her interpretation. When Poulantzas (1979) writes that I must denounce my own reading of Marx and accept his work as complex, "One must know whether one remains within a Marxist framework or not; and if one does, one accepts the determinist role of the economic in the very complex sense..." (67) and when Meszaros (1970) declares the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* to be mystifyingly complex, Marx is lost to the public.

In their statements about Marxist theory, Poulantzas and Meszaros have reserved Marx for academics only. I disagree with the notion that one can only read Marx, or any theorist, as complex and that one must choose a theoretical camp. The overarching issue of this dissertation is how intellectuals might cultivate social life in resistance to commodified life. Thus, I intend my reading of Marx not as a contribution to Marxist scholars' understanding of Marx, not as a search for what Marx *really* intended to say, but as a means to understand better the current state of public administration. My claim is that those seeking to understand their world ought to be able to inform that understanding through their own reading of these theorists.

A genealogy of my ideas is necessary because, as Michael Ryan (1982) writes, "I think who I have known and what I have read and seen and heard" (156). As Agger (1992b) explains, books write authors. Authors thus write authors. These are the authors that have written me and my inevitable re-writing of them.

1.1.1 A Genealogy of my use of Public and Social Life

I use the word public to describe the ideal of shared social imagination. I assume that the social world is public to the extent that we are creating our social world together

rather than it being imposed upon us without our own imagination providing mediation (Agger 1989). I therefore treat the concept of public and the associated public sphere as an iconoclastic utopian category (Jacoby 2005) that describes the possibility for shared social imagination. Iconoclastic utopianism has no blueprint (Jacoby 2005, 119) and thus resists a pre-determined outcome while retaining the possibility of imagining a better future^{iv}.

I assume that the possibility for altering the social world is currently eclipsed by the de-signification of lived experience in fast capitalism (Agger 1989). Fast capitalism describes a period in which the texts that portray our experience in the world discipline imagination by appearing not to be written (Agger 1989, 86). Fast capitalism thus describes a period dominated by “a positivist culture [which] swallows textuality but then expels it into the exterior world. As a text itself these dispersed versions exercise a power over ‘readers’ who live them as unalterable versions of the unalterable” (24). The loss of the category *alterable* eclipses the possibility of the public participating in the creation of social life. This is distinctly anti-democratic in that it excludes the possibility of change and in doing so denies the public the opportunity to participate in the creation of their social world.

The word public has lost much of its political significance; it is what Agger (1989) calls a “fast text.” We internalize the “truth” of a public without pausing to consider what it means and how our use of the word might disguise alternative understandings. This is especially true in a formal state guaranteed to be “democratic” by virtue of the structure the Constitution. The Constitution de-authors the state by

declaring its form to be permanent and democratic. The discussion of what democratic means is forestalled by the declaration of a formally democratic state. Public therefore very quickly becomes private, or exclusionary, by virtue of ending discourse about its substantive meaning. This exclusion denies public its political value where political value creates possibility for change.

Because I assume that the state is not inherently public, I base my discussion of public in the broader category of social life, as opposed to the state. Mark Neocleous' (1995) interprets Marx's varying use of the phrase social life to be a critique of bourgeois civil society. Following Neocleous, I treat social life as a critical category in contrast to the exclusionary logic of liberalism, which marginalizes all knowledge, images and persons that would deny liberalism's myth of equity (Ryan 1982). I therefore employ the concept of social life as encompassing lived experience, which is both constructed and marginalized by the organization of and interrelationship between the state and capitalism. I thus define social life as that which transcends the logic of the state and civil society. The argument that runs throughout this dissertation is that the relationship between the state and knowledge disguises the possibility of alternatives through the exclusion of social life from our understanding of the relationship between the state and the public. As Michael Warner (2002) writes, "Criteria inevitably have positive content... When any public is taken to be *the* public, those limitations invisibly order the political world" (106-107).

I assume that what happens in *reaction* to the state, that which does not fit into the logic of the state, is a source of knowledge for how the state might otherwise be

organized. The exclusion of this knowledge is thus the means by which change is prevented. I propose that a democratic intellectuality for public administration ought to cultivate social life as a means to reveal to the public the possibility of transformation. The point of such cultivation is to empower the public's own voice, as Alain Touraine (2001) writes:

We must resolutely reject all discourses that try to convince us that we are powerless. How long can we go on listening to and speaking a language that contradicts what we feel and even what we do? How long are the going to go on telling us that we are subject to the absolute domination of the international economy, when we invent and defend ideals, discuss reforms and break the silence everyday of our lives? (116)

When the knowledge inherent to social life is revealed, the ways in which people make sense of and attempt to change the impoverished conditions of their lives is legitimated. A democratic public administration would therefore cultivate social life as a means to work with the public to discover the foundation of a genuinely democratic state – one based in the experiences of the public. I will therefore shift the ontological basis of public administration from the state to social life.

In suggesting a new intellectuality for public administration I propose that public administration scholars shift the focus of their scholarship from the production of knowledge in service of the state to the excavation of the excluded knowledge in social life. I understand social life to be an alternative source of knowledge as well as a utopian category. The category social life is not only non-exclusionary, it also avoids the assumption that the only possible form of democratic social organization is that of the liberal state and civil society. Social life is an indeterminate category of possibility and thus its cultivation is the communication of the possibility for change.

1.1.2 A Genealogy of my use of Commodification

Despite the fact that I will draw broadly from critical social theory, as well as postmodern and poststructuralist theory, I insist upon recognition that this discussion is entirely dependent upon Marx's insight regarding commodification. In constructing the concept of commodification in the relationship between public administration and the intellectual, I draw on Marx's theory of alienation. My initial choice of Marx as applicable to public administration was based on my reading of Thesis X of the *Eleven Theses on Feuerbach* (1978) in which he states: "The standpoint of the old materialism is *"civil"* society; the standpoint of the new is *human* society or social humanity" (145). And, from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1978), "[T]he return of man from religion, family, state, etc., to his *human*, that is to say, his *social* mode of existence" (85). My point here is that the phrases "social humanity" and "*social* mode of existence" resonated with me as the fundamental purpose of a public administration that intended to serve a public. The word human, if simply by its breadth, stands in contrast to customer, and thus speaks directly to the recent emergence of the "customer-citizen," which denies the possibility of a social citizen, and "customer-student," which denies the possibility of a social student. Neither the customer nor the consumer require social life; they only require a market. The human is a broader concept than the consumer, social is a broader concept than exchange, and social humanity is a broader concept than a market or a *civil* society with its associated norms. Thus, through this lens we can conceive of a social space that is broader than market and hegemony.

I focus on Marx's (1978) discussion of alienation because it illuminates how we digressed from the *human being* to the *consumer* in our understanding of social life. Social life, in which individuals relate to one another, requires the entire human, including feelings of empathy and understanding, *as well as shock and outrage*. The market-democracy, in which citizens express only their preferences, requires only that narrow part of the human that consumes and prefers. A Marxist reading of this phenomenon describes it as the alienation of the human being as a result of estrangement from their labor. A key point in my understanding of Marx is that the relevance of his discussion of alienated labor is intensified in the post-industrial era. The discussion of the citizen and the student as consumer further cements alienation so that not only am I discussing one's labor as alienated, I am discussing one's citizenship and education as alienated, a point that Marx makes tacitly, but that I will draw out further.

Throughout this dissertation I speak broadly of commodification. I discuss the economic calculus of the academic career (Agger 1999), the consumer mentality of the student and the citizen, the *branding* of public administration, universities, and entire countries, and the commodification of knowledge. In my use of each of these phrases I draw on my understanding of Marx's discussion of the alienated human being. In doing so, I accept Marx's fundamentally democratic thesis that through the sale of one's labor, one becomes alienated from oneself, whatever the self may be, and the social world. Additionally, Marx's discussion of commodities will help us to understand how public

administration and the university, and our activity within these spaces, have been reduced to exchange.

According to Marx (1978), the process of estrangement from one's labor, and the resulting alienation from oneself, takes place as a result of engaging in labor, not as a the satisfaction of a personal need, but as the means to satisfy a need external to oneself (74). Perhaps an easier way to understand this is to work backwards: in *absence* of the market, in which one class owns the means of production and profits from such ownership, while another class produces this profit not for oneself, but for a wage, a member of the producing class might engage on a different qualitative level. However, the market metaphor dictates that the only means by which the non-owner can survive is to sell one's labor, thus dictating what that labor will be and determining its qualitative character. As a laborer, I do not decide what my activity will be, nor do I enjoy the result of my labor, which belongs to someone else, someone who will extract profit from my labor, and thus I am fundamentally separated, or estranged, from my own activity and therefore alienated from my self.

My discussion of commodification will overlap with my discussion of ideology through the lens of what Marx refers to as commodity fetishism. While I will draw on Antonio Gramsci and Georg Lukacs in the following discussion of ideology, both of these authors build on a fundamental recognition by Marx of the process through which our relations obtain "phantom objectivity" (Lukacs 1971, 83). Marx synthesizes this in *Capital* (1978), where he writes that, if commodities could speak, they would tell us "our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does

belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values" (328). Yet objectivity is obtained through the insistence that this value is inherent.

Marx is thus describing not only alienation from social life but the process by which we commodify our world and then proceed to fetishism, by which we separate the commodity from its production, rendering it "natural" and thus unavoidable. Human action and interaction is commodified, and thus the quality of that action and interaction is inhumane and anti-social. This has significant implications for how we will relate to one another in the social sphere. Our ability to understand one another independent of our labor, of our commodification, is decreased, if not lost. Furthermore, this commodification is reproduced and solidified to the point that we are no longer able to imagine an alternative social life. I will build on this construction of imagination in my later discussion of ideology, for now I simply want to establish that Marx's understanding of alienation assists us in the understanding of the quality of social life.

Once we acknowledge Marx's understanding of the human in relation to capitalist labor, it becomes difficult to take for granted that the only possibility for human interaction is economic interaction. I read Marx as understanding that the *least human* of all interactions is the economic interaction. Thus, I propose that alienation, as Marx discussed it, has implications for how our pursuit of social life unfolds. This alienation is the first step in the process by which citizens come to conceive of themselves as a consumer-customers rather than as a full human being. When we couple

this process with the alienation of the academic intellectual, who might otherwise write for the public rather than for tenure, there are serious implications for social life.

Consider Marx's discussion of money at the conclusion of *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (1978), in which he explains the process by which money changes the interaction between human beings to the detriment of social life. "Money," he writes, "is the *alienated ability of man-kind*" (104). It is the means by which the human being is able to express his or her desire and thus, when it is restrictive, it mediates, or distorts, human needs. This is a critical point. My humanity, what I desire to do, is transformed by money because money transforms that need. Money, in its restriction or permission, is thus productive, or, in Marx's words, it has "*truly creative power*" (ibid.).

Marx's understanding of money has implications for social life, for our ability to interact with one another and understand one another. Consider that social life, discourse, and a genuinely public administration require that we are able to communicate as human beings. The desire to communicate, the desire to learn, the desire to listen -- these most basic foundations of social life -- are first lost in the process of personal alienation and then subject to distortion through commodification. It is this distortion and commodification that the field of public administration must be concerned with if it is to cultivate social life in a democratic state. Not only does public administration need to be concerned with the public, but also with its own commodification. Our commodification as scholars of public administration significantly influences what we can do for the public.