1. Public management in the postmodern era: an introduction

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SCOPE AND AIMS

Exploring public policy and management from an avowedly postmodern perspective has its dangers. The state of affairs we identify on both the theoretical and practical levels could, for some, lead merely to philosophical introspection: the kind of postmodern approach which analyses only itself as the object of enquiry and decries any attempt to engage with a swirling and seemingly capricious reality out-there, akin to the paralysis of thought and action depicted in Edvard Munch’s ‘The Scream’. Yet such a response would take us nowhere on the level of theoretical understanding of the postmodern environment and, worse, it would leave the world of practice to fend for itself, with the implicit message that we, as scholars and researchers, have nothing of value to say to those charged with the future of public provision.

We reject this analysis. Hence, within this collection, the aim is to make sense of both theory and practice in postmodern times. Our approach can be summarised in a statement of broad propositions. First, at the theoretical level, a key theme is that the reassuring predictabilities of foundationalist paradigms have given way to a fluid and uncertain era in which there is no single available explanation of the changing nature of public management and policy. Theoretical understanding must therefore be based in a recognition of this state of flux as a normal condition. Reference to a ‘new’ public management is now woefully inadequate as any kind of theoretical tool and attempts at explanation must instead be based within a postmodern frame of reference. Secondly, the political dimension of this postmodern era is that the tenets of ‘modernisation’ as the basis of public sector reform across a range of societies have outlived their usefulness as a framework for policy programmes. Thirdly, at the applied level of public management practice, the implication of living in postmodern times is that individual actors, in the absence of any coherent overall explanation of change or any clear guide to action, increasingly employ their own
methods of sense-making based on the circumstances at hand, using the tools of understanding at their disposal.

The book as a whole applies a critical perspective to theory and practice in public policy and management, challenging received orthodoxies about public service reform and its interpretation. It presents a number of accounts of the contemporary public sector environment, arranged thematically rather than by sector or country. It suggests that the search for a unifying prescription for public service reform is fraught with theoretical and practical pitfalls and is likely to be futile. It argues instead that actors make sense of the public sector environment through numerous practical and/or anti-foundational responses. There is no simple or single answer in considering the future of public policy and management: the future derives from (and will be interpreted by others through) the lived experience of the actors involved and the meaning assigned to what they do. In this way the desire of many national governments to provide an overall roadmap for public service reform is misconceived. Such a roadmap tends to include a vision of public provision where public services ‘need to become something different to meet the demands of modern society’ (Fenwick and McMillan, 2005: 51, italics in original) but this is based on a foundational logic of gradual progress, with all its assumptions, and it fails to recognise the individual actor’s sense-making ability. We return to this theme in the closing chapter.

The central focus of the book is thus upon public policy and public management in an era beyond modernisation. We will assume that the case has already been established for being ‘beyond the New Public Management (NPM)’. We argue that old orthodoxies and debates have been superseded by a fluid setting in which there is no ‘best way’ to do things. In a postmodernised public policy environment, there is no compass and no clear indication of where we have been and of where we are going. Hence actors default to their habitual ways of working, from whenever and wherever these may be drawn. Thus we advocate an anti-foundational approach for both public policy-makers and managers.

We recognise that complexities and challenges arise in adopting this position. Anti-foundational approaches can be and are subverted by systems of governance that tend to propel actors back toward known foundational positions. Governance systems, by their nature, cannot match the rhetoric of third-way pragmatism and post-foundational thinking. Governance itself tends to impose a foundational logic on patterns of public policy and management. Either the systems employed by government need to match the logic of a fluid postmodern world, or they need at least to allow small-scale incremental foundational steps that can be managed. We are propounding not only the inevitability of anti-foundationalism in a postmodern world; we are advocating this as the only possible response in an environment
where all previous positions, not least those associated with neo-liberalism, have failed. Our perspective also necessarily focuses upon the beliefs and practices – political and managerial – of the actors involved in generating, implementing and managing public policy. In this setting, actors look to available sense-making techniques in order to do their jobs. In doing this, they are obliged to look beyond the available discourses of modernisation and of public service reform. The currency of these has already passed.

This book does not provide an audit or chronology of public service reforms. Instead it presents a critical analysis of practice and theory. Internationally, the practice of public service modernisation has represented a set of changes common within industrialised societies at a certain point in history, accompanied by a narrative of reform which made sense of those changes on the grounds both of necessity and of progress. Theoretically, these reforms could be understood within the twin perspectives of neo-liberal economics and the notion of a newly responsive public sector. Today, there is no prevailing narrative through which sense can be made of current changes in public management and policy. While numerous available narratives are on offer, there is not and cannot be a single dominant explanation of current ‘trends’. Instead, there is a state of flux of both theory and practice, a postmodern condition rigorously explored within the current collection.

In addition to the distinctive theoretical perspective of the collection, it engages with practice in an original way. The beliefs and experience of policy actors and managers tend toward either foundational or anti-foundational ways of making sense. The key question for practice is: how can governance be changed to support actors in finding their own solutions to complex problems, in the context of mutually desired aims? Prescriptive methods imposed from the centre, even in the name of progressive social reform in Europe, Latin America or elsewhere, offer only another version of foundationalism and of how it ‘must be done’: a modernist conception of onward progress. We suggest that the question for practice is not ‘how to do it’, but of how to arrange governance in order to allow ‘it’ – public policy and public management – to be done, perhaps in ways that we currently do not or cannot envisage. The rhetoric of public service pragmatism asserts that this is happening already. Our position is that it is not, because of persistent intractable problems of governance that must first be tackled if effective practice is to match anti-foundational theory.

In the UK, this fluidity has coincided politically with the end of the New Labour epoch, a period where the discourse of modernisation has run its course, compounded in its closing stages by unprecedented economic uncertainty. As Rhodes et al. (2003) argue, the British state has been ‘hollowed out’ from above, below and sideways, meaning that no British
core executive has the capacity to act effectively. This, along with other influencing governance features, has resulted in a ‘differentiated polity’, outlined by Bache and Flinders (2004) as being characterised by, among other aspects, heterarchy; central government steering; multiple lines of accountability; fragmented civil service; multi-level bargaining, and shared sovereignty. In this conception of governance the centre still retains some pivotal control through, for example, greater control of resources compared with other actors in the system (Bache, 2003). Several chapters in this book develop these themes, and indeed we would go further: we would propose that the differentiated polity has itself reached a postmodern condition where the features indentified by Rhodes and others still exist but are pushed to the extremes of sense-making in public service provision. Sense-making goes on at the periphery of conventional discourse, at the edges of the official life of the public services.

The developments and debates explored in the collection are international in their scope, but we do not intend that this is confined to the United States and the United Kingdom. Comparable choices and uncertainties are confronted in societies that have passed through their own modernisation phases (such as New Zealand, discussed by Andrew Massey in Chapter 5), or have avoided confronting the choices in exactly the same way (such as Ireland or France), or in transitional societies (such as those in Eastern Europe or China) who are ‘learning’ from experience elsewhere. Thus the key concerns of the book are global and draw their examples widely, for instance in the international comparisons offered by David Farnham in Chapter 6. Taken as a whole, the collection assesses the impact on both theory and practice of the prevailing postmodern condition in public policy and management. Thus the era with which this book is concerned is defined theoretically, politically and managerially.

The collection is about postmodernity – the time and place we find ourselves in, the state we are in, a condition beyond modernity – and about postmodernism – the (multiple) ways of conceiving of postmodernity, beyond existing theoretical positions, especially foundational theories, and certainly beyond NPM. The book is theoretically informed but is not aimed toward elaboration of theory for its own sake. It is about how public policy and public management can be conceived of in postmodern times.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK AND KEY THEMES

The chapters are grouped into three parts, dealing with concepts and theories, applications and practice, and, finally, overall resolution and conclusions.
Introduction

Conceptualising and Theorising

The first part of the book explores some key conceptual and theoretical challenges arising from the dominance of modernist ways of thinking. Following this introduction, Wayne Parsons provides a definitive statement of public policy and policy analysis as components of the modernist project, discussing ways in which an abiding concern with problems and policy has propelled academic enquiry toward a model based on rationality. The discussion by Parsons of the work of key thinkers including Lindblom, Wildavsky and Rittel provides a rich historical context for understanding the dominant paradigm of modernism, and points also to its essential deficiencies. Parsons detects a return to modernism in the managerialist responses of the late 1990s and the twenty-first century, a ‘remix’ of old solutions presented as new and fresh. He suggests that within postmodern approaches may be found new insights into the making and understanding of public policy, not least in the ‘playfulness’ of those perspectives which subvert the old modernist model, and a new criticality in challenging policy conventions in a world which has transcended the old wisdoms and critiques of Left and Right. Drawing from research in economics as well as in public policy, Parsons sets out a clear and challenging theoretical statement to open the book’s substantive discussions, predicated on the impossibility of certainty and the manifest failures of modernist policy approaches.

A clear theoretical statement of intent follows in Paul Frissen’s chapter. The conceptual basis of the contemporary public sector welfare state is explored in terms of its essentially modernist character. This, it is argued, is concerned ultimately with discipline and control. Frissen explores the insights offered by aspects of libertarian thinking in relation to negative freedom, developing a notion of non-purposive politics and democracy ‘without a centre’ within the postmodern world. In common with the perspective advanced by Wayne Parsons in the previous chapter, Frissen rejects the ‘problem-solving’ orientation of state intervention along with the view that society as a whole can be managed. An intriguing view is offered of the ‘modesty’ required by political and public administration, in place of the grand, and misplaced, claims of modernist strategy. In an eloquent exposition of what ‘letting go’ and ‘leaving’ mean for the essentially uncontrollable nature of the reality around us, Paul Frissen offers a view that would have been anathema to the grand theoreticians of public policy and the advocates of public managerialism alike. Yet his analysis also takes us back to a reconsideration of the insights of an earlier generation that may now have been forgotten, not least Lindblom’s advocacy of incrementalism and ‘muddling through’. What else – we are tempted to add – is there for us to do?
The section on conceptualising and theorising concludes with a lucid discussion by Mark Evans of policy transfer within the competition state. Here we find a critical and analytical review of what policy transfer has meant within a rational model of policy-making. Defining the UK as a ‘competition state’, Evans considers policy transfer as both cross-disciplinary and cross-national in its scope, focusing upon the globalising impact of policy actors’ search for new ways to cope with the perceived reality around them. On one level Evans presents a comprehensive account of what policy transfer is and the ways in which it can fail or succeed. This is valuable in identifying, for instance, the ‘coercive’ policy transfer relationship between the West and some other societies. More important, in the context of the themes of the book as a whole, the chapter is about governance, globalisation and learning. It links the theoretical debates back to an empirical base, one of our concerns throughout. The chapter by Mark Evans poses some significant questions for us. In the UK, the principal tenets of public service ‘modernisation’ – that already dated political incarnation of NPM – drew (in)famously from experience in other countries, whether it was borrowing local elected mayors from continental Europe or the Child Support Agency rationale from the United States. The United States remains an exemplar to some transitional countries in Asia and Eastern Europe, while other societies in the South actively pursue an alternative paradigm. In which direction and with what consequences is the process of policy transfer now travelling? This chapter defines the current state-of-the-art in relation to policy transfer under conditions of rapid change.

Having established some challenging theoretical dimensions for the collection as a whole, the next part of the book shifts attention to ‘applications and actors’.

Applications and Actors

Informed by theoretical debates, the intention in this section is to reflect directly on practice in a postmodern public service environment. Thus Chapters 5, 6 and 7 explore the lived world of public sector practitioners.

This part of the book begins with Andrew Massey’s discussion of professions and professionalism. The implications of changes prompted by NPM are considered for the work of public service professionals. Massey finds that debates about the power of professionals have ‘moved on’ in the postmodern era, as we have increasingly had to take account of how professionals operate within globalised systems of governance. This embraces issues such as regulation of professional behaviour, ethics, the application of codes of conduct and professional power. Within a differentiated polity,
the central policy apparatus must conceive new methods – including negotiation and use of international partners – to get its own way and, again, this impacts significantly on the role and influence of professionals. Central to Andrew Massey’s argument is that within new patterns of governance there need to be new approaches to the professions.

This is followed, again with the emphasis firmly upon practice, by David Farnham’s analysis of contemporary public management. A common context is shared with the previous chapter: a public sector environment characterised by globalisation, the collapse of modernist theories of the Left, and a reliance on private and third sector providers which are in some cases under transnational ownership. Farnham looks in detail at working life on an international scale in this uncertain world of public service, including performance, managerialism and, in particular, human resource management. He alludes to aspects of change not usually given much attention by commentators, including higher levels of stress and violence in the lives of public servants, and, again, recognises the challenge to professionalism in a turbulent world. In postmodern conditions, there have been fundamental changes in what Farnham terms the ‘public life’, ‘private life’ and ‘working life’ of the public services, manifested in less stability and more diversity for public sector practitioners at a time of rapid change.

Finally in this section, Guy Peters offers a reconsideration of the public servant within the bureaucratic organisation, where – not for the first or last time in this collection of essays – the continuing influence of Weberian thought is evident. Peters argues that while NPM may not be new, or public, it has certainly been about management, and he unravels some of the elements of this. He notes that if bureaucracy has declined as a paradigm for the public sector, it has not been replaced with any coherent alternative. Academics and practitioners thus have to cope with uncertainty and a range of ad hoc solutions – one of the recurring themes of this book. Given that the role of public employees becomes ever less clear in these changing conditions, Guy Peters presents a constructive empirical typology of choices available to practitioners. These include the ‘back to the future’ option of ‘bureaucrat’, the adoption of the NPM role of ‘manager’, the stance of practical ‘policy-maker’, the role of ‘negotiator’ in a mixed economy of public and private providers and partnerships, and the intriguing role of ‘democrat’.

All three chapters in this section focus upon what public employees are doing in the changing and sometimes troubled world they inhabit. This focus is absolutely essential in keeping critical commentary anchored to the public sector world being analysed by the theoreticians of public policy.
Resolution and Sense-Making

The concluding part of the book turns to ‘resolution and sense-making’, comprising chapters 8 and 9, which provide a critical overview in very different ways.

Henrik Bang’s critical review in Chapter 8 considers everyday makers and expert citizens: sense-makers in the world of civil society. Bang places public policy firmly in the arena of governance and politics while also drawing attention to its limits. He argues forcefully that in a world where the old frameworks and solutions have failed, there are new ways of making sense based on the expertise and activism of the lay citizen. In a practical way this focuses upon lived experience. Theoretically, it revisits the question – also considered by Guy Peters – of whether public administration is art or science. In a discussion which takes in Aristotle, the Obama presidential campaign, globalisation and participation, Henrik Bang moves the focus of our attention back to the crucial theoretical issues with which we began: the decline of old ways of working, the choices facing both theoreticians and practitioners, and the emphasis upon ‘everyday’ sense-making by active individuals aware that they cannot fall back onto old foundationalist solutions. Above all, Bang offers a distinctly optimistic message.

In the final chapter, we pull together the key themes of the book and re-examine its initial concerns. The closing chapter reviews the deficiencies of the foundationalist paradigm and its shortcomings as both theory and basis for practice. Taking the position that modernist approaches have failed – a theme evident throughout the book – we then develop an alternative approach for postmodern times, focusing upon multiple narratives, a non-linear conception of policy-making, and a recognition that solutions are numerous and context-bound. There is no single policy solution to single policy problems. By definition, a postmodern approach cannot offer a final summary meta-narrative. Instead, ‘letting go’ is more relevant than ever, not as an admission of weakness, but as an assertion of strength in the ability of practical actors to find solutions. We emphasise the importance of actors’ sense-making and active learning. As in the previous chapter, the message is an optimistic one for both policy and practice: a depiction of what is possible.

CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

In sum, this new collection of essays is not a description of developments in public management nor is it a chronology of events. It is a critical
discursive review, addressing both theory and practice, predicated upon dissatisfaction with the received wisdoms of public policy and public management. The following essays are diverse in their approach and are united by a concern with making sense of an uncertain public sector world where theory has been left behind by hyper- rapid change and practice has been cast adrift by inadequate theory. The book places itself firmly within an anti-foundational framework where the conventions of a ‘new’ public management and the critique once posed by ‘modernisation’ are now redundant. This leaves public policy and management in uncharted territory. The collection aims to map this terrain for the first time.

REFERENCES


