Juggling and Serving Accountably: Panorama and Normative Synthesis on Public Service

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Getting public-service fundamentals together through a profound panorama of developments and details associated with leadership in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) distinguishes Beryl Radin’s analysis in The Accountable Juggler. Deep historical and contemporary connectedness of understanding marks her penetrating study. Setting public-service periods apart, nearly as caricatures but with informed contents beyond mere sketches, and searching for synthesis of normative foundations characterize Janet Denhardt’s and Robert Denhardt’s advocacy in The New Public Service: Serving, not Steering. The authors stretch beyond reaction against what they identify as negatives of New Public Management (NPM). They seek to displace transactionally instrumental doctrine with transformational public-service values that they find rooted in three sets of democratic ideals: engaged citizenship, shared public interests, and public service modeled to facilitate those norms. While these books contrast in key respects, two subjects dominate both: accountability in constitutional democracy and complexities of public service and leadership.

Accountability in Constitutional Democracy

The Quest for Accountability in American Government is the subtitle of Frederick C. (Fritz) Mosher’s classic 1979 study of the U.S. General Accounting Office and was a disciplined passion of his life, as reflected in another classic, Democracy and the Public Service (1st ed., 1968). That theme is basic in the books under review. Both reflect continuities of understanding of accountability in constitutional democracy.

Radin’s theme of a cabinet secretary performing as an Accountable Juggler addresses constitutional fundamentals and three types of accountability expectations—policy, political, and management processes—that face a public servant at that level. For her title, Radin acknowledges a debt to Herbert Kaufman’s 1981 analysis that top officials need a juggler’s disposition. Radin also cites Garry Wills (1999) and many others to support understandings that: “the American political system—with its fundamental cultural norm of distrust of concentrated governmental power—has always made the accountability task of governance extremely complex. But recent skepticism about government has increased this sense of distrust” (22). The extensive and intensive documentation in Radin’s study ties it to historical and contemporary theory and practice that explain continuities of understanding of public service. She credits usefulness of John Kingdon’s model “to promote an understanding of a system with several properties: pattern and structure in complicated, fluid, and seemingly unpredictable phenomena; residual randomness; and historically contingent behavior” (136). And crucially, throughout this study, Radin draws on the example of Donna Shalala, the consummately accountable juggler.

Unlike the Denhardt volume, Radin’s book is not a reaction against NPM, but she touches on it where relevant, contrasting Osborne’s and Gaebler’s advocacy of entrepreneurial
government (1992) and Behn’s proposal for new performance-assessment methods for democratic accountability (2001) with more enduring frameworks and understandings. Radin explains: “Instead of attempting to identify a ‘one size fits all’ approach to accountability, I seek to describe the alternative approaches to accountability that must be balanced by an HHS secretary” (24).

In the process, she displays an impressivelycommanding knowledge of legal provisions, institutional histories, leading personalities, and the interrelations among them that facilitate public-service accomplishment.

Denhardt and Denhardt pointedly set forth The New Public Service (NPS) as a normative force to displace key NPM doctrines with democratic accountability: “Government shouldn’t be run like a business; it should be run like a democracy” (3). Because they are central to NPS as a reaction, Osborne’s and Gaebler’s Re-inventing Government prescriptions for entrepreneurial public organizations require recall. They ranged from a first admonition, “Steer More than They Row,” to “Solve Problems by Leveraging the Marketplace Rather than Simply Creating Public Programs.” The first nine chapters of The New Public Service emphasize differences from NPM. The chapters include: Public Administration and the New Public Management; The Roots of the New Public Service; Serve Citizens, Not Customers; Seek the Public Interest; Value Citizenship over Entrepreneurship; Think Strategically, Act Democratically; Recognize that Accountability Isn’t Simple; Serve Rather than Steer; and Value People, Not Just Productivity.

A concluding chapter succinctly summarizes the entire book, facilitating quick and easy grasp of the authors’ contentions and their analytical framework in support of accountability to democratic citizenship. Key points are these (172):

The New Public Service is not just the latest management fad or technique. It is, instead, a definition of who we are and why we serve others. It is a fundamental reordering of values…. Currently New Public Management and its surrogates have been established as the dominant paradigm in the field of governance and public administration. In this process, a concern for democratic citizenship and the public interest have not been fully lost, but rather have been subordinated. We would argue, however, that in a democratic society, a concern for democratic values should be paramount in the way we think about systems of governance.

Aversion to the “customers” theme of NPM has resulted in a widespread schism within American public administration, one that is basic in this NPS book. To counteract the citizens as customers doctrine, accountability of government under the Constitution of the United States is increasingly—nearly exclusively in some rhetoric—discussed only in terms of citizens’ rights, security, and responsibilities, including involvement in public administration. Often, this nearly exclusive focus on citizens is associated with simple democratic polity, against which Aristotle cautioned, rather than constitutional democracy, to describe the framework of the American political system.

Constitutional democracy is supposed to sustain values of human dignity and government under reasonable standards of law with respect to all people who come under the reach of the Constitution, not simply citizens. In America, non-citizens serve in the military (many have sacrificed their lives for this country); make distinctive scholarly and other professional and creative contributions; engage in social self-governance and responsible economic enterprise; and support constitutional frameworks of government. Accountability of government to constitutional principles that assure human dignity and government under law is now challenged in efforts to deal with extreme complexities of terrorism and security. Such accountability may be especially threatened when the field of public administration neglects these principles by considering constitutional values and the basic responsibilities of civic duty and public service to be limited to citizens.

Public Service and Leadership Complexities

Each book shows both expert knowledge of complexities of leadership and public service and a balanced appreciation for them. Although Radin highlights service at the cabinet secretary level, she also explicates the roles of the department’s agencies and the varied responsibilities fulfilled by career and political public servants. Another subtitle of her book could be Responsible Informed Facilitation of Varied and Broadly Shared Leadership in a Federal Agency. Denhardt and Denhardt argue unapologetically against NPM, probing what they identify as three historical frameworks of American public administration for selected continuities and contrasts at the heart of public service. Another subtitle of their book could be Responsible Facilitation of Democratic Citizenship.

Radin presents service and leadership complexities, as dealt with by HHS Secretary Donna Shalala, as intertwined across hierarchical, agency, and intergovernmental lines in an environment calling for a “sense of fluidity and turbulence” (136). Long before her appointment as HHS secretary, Shalala understood that the department has always been populated with professional experts and others in widely diverse fields that often touch on life-and-death matters. Radin notes that “one could describe the staff...
of HHS as a variation on Noah’s ark” (134). Early in her study, Radin discusses Rufus Miles’s 1974 book, *The Department of H.E.W.*, dedicated, as Radin notes, “To the Unsung Career Employees of HEW” (28). Miles had been skeptical of the creation of gigantic departments that combined widely varied, professionally specialized responsibilities with challenging intergovernmental and other networks. Some HEW/HHS secretaries have tried to employ centralized command-and-control structure to cope with such challenges. Shalala’s style, by contrast, was to share responsibility and leadership, seeking roles “for top management in the context of decentralized, flat, and devolved organizations” (101). Through a grounded understanding of the American intergovernmental framework, “[f]ederal officials were challenged to learn to be facilitators, brokers, and often behind-the-scenes actors in the implementation process” (134).

Service and leadership in NPS entail facilitation of citizens’ involvement in government. While acknowledging that this is not a new concept, Denhardt and Denhardt conclude that “historically, our representative democracy has largely confined the role of the citizen to voting every few years and occasionally communicating with elected officials” (94). They contrast NPM negatively with NPS in many respects, as in a discussion of coproduction, which they describe as focused on “cost savings and efficiency” in NPM and on “ideals of community and citizenship in the New Public Service” (116–17).

Denhardt and Denhardt divide the field’s history into “The Old Public Administration” (their term), NPM, and NPS. They identify nine “core ideas” as being generally representative of “the mainstream view of Old Public Administration” (11). As an instructive contortion, this caricature is useful for contrasts. It does not mention law at all. And it also bends other realities a bit much. For example: “Public organizations operate most efficiently as closed systems; thus citizen involvement is limited” (12). Recall that open-systems practices were vital many decades before NPM and NPS, as reflected in Katz’s and Kahn’s first edition of *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (1966), which was virtually compulsory in study and practice of public administration during the Great Society era. Likewise recall the collection of essays in honor of Paul Appleby edited by Roscoe Martin (1965), including Appleby’s article, “Public Administration and Democracy.” Denhardt and Denhardt cite earlier publications by Appleby, dating back to *Big Democracy* (1945). Recall that earlier still, civic duty and public service were combined values in the political reform era that gave birth to American public administration as a disciplined field of practice and scholarship (Newland).

Critics of NPM may conclude that the movement has sometimes resorted to distorted caricatures and knocking down straw men to attack mainstream public administration. Such rhetorical deficiencies of NPM were sometimes due to ignorance of public administration among newcomers to the field. Although *The New Public Service* occasionally distorts, its exposition is generally balanced with informed “whereas and however” nuances and examples from vital literature. NPM, for example, was associated initially with making charges that, before it championed supposedly new market orientations, efficient implementation almost alone characterized the field to the neglect of effectiveness and policy. Yet, such academic leaders as Dwight Waldo, Fritz Mosher, and Emmett Redford and such practitioners as Harold Smith, Donald Stone, James Webb, Elmer Staats, and Perry Cookingham were working far beyond such limits long before either NPM or NPS were ever imagined. As noted, the analysis of the Old Public Administration in Denhardt and Denhardt is more informed and balanced than are many NPM polemics. But distinguishing between caricatures and nuances in their pursuit of NPS norms requires considerable historical understanding.

Readers would also benefit from considering, along with the Denhardt and Denhardt book, the well-known 1994 critique of NPM by John DiIulio, “Principled Agents: The Cultural Bases of Behavior in a Federal Government Bureaucracy.” DiIulio’s subject, chiefly behaviors of public servants in the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, reaches back through time to what the NPS book terms “The Old Public Administration.” His analysis shows that the sometimes overdrawn caricatures presented by NPM distorted the truth about transformational, constitutive behaviors of many public servants. Informed members of the Model T generation (from the civic reform era of politics and administration) would have added that what initially passed for NPM scholarship sometimes resembled an old car quickly covered with furniture polish rather than truly refinished before being put out for sale. In short, does NPM really warrant designation as one of only three featured frameworks of public administration? And have scholars and practitioners who have associated with NPM remained insulated and unchanged in thinking and practices? Radin’s informed analysis does not disclose such an exclusive emphasis or fixed dogma at HHS.

In scholarship as in politics, informed caricatures, when balanced in purpose, time, and audience, have the merit of stressing important contrasts. Denhardt and Denhardt originally presented the themes of NPS and contrasted them with those of NPM on the Web site of the American Society for Public Administration following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Knowing that helps one to understand the value of the contrasts sketched in this book.
and the theme they underline: “Public servants do not deliver customer service; they deliver democracy.”

Conclusions

Drawing on broad and deep professional experience and linkages with her challengingly complex subject matter, Radin has written a clearly articulated book that may become a classic, while deserving immediate acclaim for practicality and advancement of theory. In the foreword, Donna Shalala evaluates Radin’s book as “the best ever written on a modern cabinet agency” (x). Although Radin addresses her study to a fictional nominee for HHS secretary, it is splendidly oriented to interests of practitioners and scholars. It warrants wide classroom and other professional use, not least for its recognition of shared leadership and other devoted work among political and career public servants.

Denhardt and Denhardt forcefully fulfill their promise for their book: “The New Public Service seeks to pose and inform a number of central normative questions about the field” (3). They combine scholarship and devotion to norms of constitutionally democratic public service in a book that merits wide readership and discussion to inspire practice of high ideals.

References


