Public Administration's Utopia

Analysis Using Critical Theories

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Utopia for public administrators is a special place, often one reaching toward self-governance through transparency and open government. This vision of utopia operates based on specific principles reflecting the values of the residents of utopia, and each resident is expected to participate in government through regular open conversations and meetings. Utopia is designed to combat the bureaucratic, hidden agendas government is accused of today, a situation referred to as "dark times" by Nabatchi, Goerdel, and Peffer. They describe living in dark times in the following quotation.

> the disappearance of the public realm, the realm that functions to "throw light on the affairs of men by providing a space of appearances in which they can show in deed and word, for better and worse, who they are and what they can do." . . . Arendt . . . asserts that the "darkness has come when this light is extinguished by "credibility gaps" and "invisible government," by speech that does not disclose what is but sweeps it under the carpet, by exhortations, moral and otherwise, that, under the pretext of upholding old truths, degrade all truth to meaningless triviality. (Nabatchi, Goerdel, & Peffer, 2011, p. 33)

Utopia, as will be explained below, is a public administration framework that rejects the weaknesses of "dark times." Utopia is a small government operating on central principles that use critical theory methodologies of public discourse, pragmatism, and individual values. Public administrators do not have their own agenda but seek to help residents become self-governing. Transparency and delegation of power to the individual help utopia to maintain itself as a public administration utopia.

Utopia has some dark spots, however. The "happy consciousness" always lurks on the edge of government as powerful elites seek to undermine individual ideals for their own use. The public administrator is constantly in danger of placing pragmatic solutions above sound governmental operations, undermining effectiveness and, eventually, citizen support for government. The public is a fickle master as well, and discourse may fail as a basic principle if residents do not participate in government at the level expected. But the point made by Bach in his *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah* warms the heart: "If you will practice being fictional for a while, you will understand that fictional characters are sometimes more real than people with

bodies and heartbeats" (1977, p. 135). Without stretching our imaginations, we will never create a new, more perfect utopia.

A PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION UTOPIA

Public administration's transparent, open, self-governance utopia can be conceptualized as a small town. A small town's characteristics fit more easily into a utopian framework because it has a smaller population with more consistent values and provides an opportunity for each resident to participate in governing the town. A small-town administrator can act as a facilitator on the job and in daily life. In a small town, true public discourse can occur—at town meetings, on the street, and in residents' homes. Town meetings offer more than 15 minutes for public comment on the items on the town meeting agenda, more than a microphone set up at a meeting in case someone wants to speak. Real public discourse requires going out to the citizens in their homes and businesses, and in the town—and a smaller public entity makes this easier. The smaller number of residents contributes to governmental transparency and information sharing, because most residents know one another's business and that of their government. In a small town, the residents tend to believe they are independent. They resist attempts at new or expanded government programs even if the benefit of the programs is significant. Utopians value their small-town, small-business climate, and any expansion of government must be sustainable given the town's the tax base and community resources. The public administrator can more easily act as a facilitator who respects the values of residents without controlling the agenda because the residents are well aware of the administrator's actions and opinions. A smaller town does not guarantee utopia, but it does contribute to the success of a transparent, open, self-governance utopian administration.

The small-town concept also supports a principle-based government. Principles in utopia's public administration framework support the economy, politics, and culture. Principles guide the government's operations and help residents understand the reasons for government decisions. The principles guiding my envisioned utopia are a sustainable society, individual rights, an expectation of resident participation, and respectful discourse in government. Utopia's government refers back to these principles in making every decision. When issues arise, public administrators consult the principles to develop solutions.

A more in-depth exploration of the guiding principles may be useful. The principles of resident participation and respectful discourse in government are enacted through regular town meetings. Residents are invited, and the agenda and meeting arrangement are designed to allow for extensive discussion with maximum participation. As mentioned above, town meetings must do more than provide time and a microphone for public comment. The meetings

should utilize some aspects of a Native American talking circle, where each participant is given the opportunity to talk. Discussions are nonjudgmental. Ideas from each individual are built upon to develop workable solutions for each member of the group (Wilson, 2008, p. 100). Throughout the discussion the public administrator takes on the role of arbiter of political conflict (Nabatchi et al., 2011, p. 34). Public institutions are able "to serve as forums where through the process of deliberation, social conflicts are resolved and individual interests are aggregated, resulting in the creation of public goals and policy decisions" (ibid.). The perspective of each member is respected, and solutions develop from the discussion. The small-town, rural character of utopia is essential to successful resident participation. A small population allows for regular town meetings, but the small population and geographic area allow the administrator to take public discourse to people's homes and to community streets. The administrator must facilitate discussion in all areas of life—when visiting neighbors, when meeting others in the town coffee shop, and when out walking in the park. The people who live in the town tend to believe in the same way of life, emphasizing sustainability of the natural environment and individual rights. These characteristics give public administrators a guide when making decisions.

In addition, public administrators in utopia must respect residents' value of limited government. The use of contractors to implement government programs allows utopian administrators to keep government small but still accomplish public administration goals. The stewardship form of contracting relationship (Van Slyke, 2006, p. 167) is extensively used in utopia. Several factors contribute to the need for the stewardship contracting model, including the small number of contractors available, the knowledge administrators have of contractors through personal relationships, and the focus on longer-term contracts in which the contractor participates more fully in the development and implementation of government programs (ibid., p. 170). There are limits to the use of a stewardship model of contracting, however. Reliance on personal relationships may create a discriminatory environment where potential contractors of different ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, religions, or not well connected are not successful bidders. The process may become closed to anyone other than the current contractor or those who have a personal connection to the public administrator. The stewardship model relies on relationships and a collaborative operating structure to develop and execute the contract's statement of work. Performance measures are either not included in the contract or are not an important part of contract monitoring. Data clearly showing how well the contractor is performing are therefore not available; residents or stakeholders may appropriately conclude that the contract is not being effectively performed or the public administrator is not objective where the contractor is concerned.

To further support this point, a discussion of the administrator's role in

utopian society may be helpful. Public administrators in utopia consider themselves residents first and administrators second. A relationship-based operation works well in this situation. The administrator is a friend, a colleague, and a member of the community, and not simply a government worker. In utopia, administrators subscribe to the democratic ethos rather than the bureaucratic ethos as defined by Nabatchi, Goerdel, and Peffer (2011, pp. 36–37). Public administrators accept their role as more than managerial or technical. Public administrators must be open, honest, and transparent about their decisions and actions. They are committed to obtaining and acting upon feedback from residents; the decisions they make are expressions of the public will rather than their own preference. Nabatchi and colleagues acknowledge that the decisions made in a democratic ethos approach may be contrary to the bureaucratic values typically espoused by public administrators. As they observe, the bureaucratic ethos values efficiency in the administration of public programs. Under the bureaucratic ethos, an administrator must use proven managerial processes, focus on measurable effectiveness, and avoid value-laden decisions. The bureaucratic ethos has a reputation for unresponsiveness and lack of accountability, and while the use of scientific management in government is intended to keep government efficient and costs low, the actual outcomes may fall short of these goals (Nabatchi et al., pp. 36–37).

In addition, the democratic ethos may be restricted if the administrator avoids all consideration of scientific management. Decisions can be made pursuant to the public will along with a recognition that residents and stakeholders believe the business of government should be conducted in an efficient, cost-effective manner. The public administrator in government today risks the loss of credibility and support if residents perceive that systems and processes are inefficient or out of control. Scientific management may create bureaucratic processes, but the checks and balances incorporated into government guard against successful claims of ignorance, fraud, or abuse by administrators and employees. The successful public administrator must devise a balance between the democratic ethos and the bureaucratic ethos to allow implementation of public goals in an efficient, least-cost manner.

CRITICAL THEORIES AND THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION UTOPIA

Critical theories useful in analyzing the public administration utopia include Habermas's theory of public discourse (Bronner, 2011, pp. 46–47), the theory of pragmatism espoused by a number of theorists including Dewey and McSwite (Box, 2005, p. 97), and the happy consciousness discussed by Bronner (2011, chap. 6). The happy consciousness is an ever-present concern in utopia (Bronner, 2011, p. 77). How can an administrator ensure that residents think clearly and accurately about their preferences and goals for government?

Advertising and publicity may dupe citizens into thinking according to the desires of elite residents, commercial interests, or a powerful business with plans for developing utopia's natural resources. Public discourse has the power to provide residents of utopia with the information they need to ensure that the happy consciousness does not take hold. Citizens can effect change through open discourse and the aid of administrators who share knowledge and decision-making power with them (Box, 2005, p. 74). The administrator in utopia will adopt a pragmatic approach to government. A pragmatist administrator will make government responsive to the will of residents, since results are not governed by any specific method but are adjusted to fit their needs. Pragmatism must be balanced with adherence to the principles of utopia to avoid a hijacking of the process by the power elite (Box, 2005, p. 99).

Critical Theory and Utopia: Public Discourse

Public discourse provides a way for citizens to engage in the political process, shifting control away from public administrators and the elite (Box, 2005, p. 70). Public discourse helps to ensure public access to and knowledge of information on governmental issues. The public administrator can promote citizen self-governance through public discourse by promoting transparent two-way communication. The theory asserts that citizens must be given the information they need to formulate their own responses to governmental and societal problems. The public administrator facilitates information sharing, problem resolution, and solution development. The administrator is a conduit for citizen solutions and does not pursue a separate agenda in the policy-development process (Box, 2005, pp. 80–82).

Alternatively, the administrator will succeed in promoting meaningful public discourse only if communication takes the role of perception into account. Research by Auerbach, Gale, and Harris on the economic effects of tax and fiscal policy shows that communication of a tax cut is as important as the characteristics of the tax cut in promoting consumer spending. Specifically, a reduction in the withholding for a tax has the same impact as an actual tax reduction on saving and consumption by taxpayers. The manner of communication and presentation to taxpayers has as much effect as the actual tax law change (Auerbach, Gale, & Harris, 2008, p. 145). Both the tax reduction and the withholding change are communicated as increases in the taxpayer's resources—more money in the citizen's pocket—to provide spending ability. The public administrator in utopia needs to keep this dynamic in mind when facilitating group and individual discussions with residents on important issues. The obvious question arises: Isn't the public administrator exercising control over individual thoughts and desires? The answer, to a degree, may be yes, but one could also argue that human nature is all about perception. Perception is reality. The administrator's role in utopia is to facilitate the

formulation and examination of the residents' reality without placing his or her priorities above theirs.

To the contrary, there are limits to the usefulness of the theory of public discourse. Elected officials often value their own political goals above citizen-formulated goals; politicians can prevent public administrators from engaging in true public discourse and information sharing (Box, 2005, p. 75). An administrator who contradicts what a politician wants in favor of developing a citizen-based solution is taking a considerable risk. A deeper limitation of public discourse exists as well, according to critical theorists. The public administrator's facilitation of the process of public discourse could be perceived as a controlling action over citizens (Box, 2005, p. 73). This perception creates a challenge for the administrator. In response, public administrators need to let go of their own agendas. In meetings, information sharing, and discussions with citizens, they may be (perhaps unknowingly) pushing their own agenda. The administrator may become the controlling entity, stopping proposals not in accord with the administrator's goals and promoting proposals in tune with them. Residents may feel satisfied on the surface, but a deep discomfort will grow if people suspect they are not an integral part of the public discourse process (Box, 2005, p. 74). Utopia may fail if there is no citizen engagement outside the control of government administrators; citizens stop contributing once they conclude that their ideas do not have meaning in the process. The administrator has the dual responsibility of promoting citizen engagement through discourse and providing the leadership necessary to accomplish citizens' goals.

Critical Theory and Utopia: Pragmatism

Pragmatism, like other critical theories, values open public discourse. Pragmatic theorists believe that decisions should be made in response to citizen discourse with a view to the future and using past, traditional practice where it makes sense. Pragmatism is touted by McSwite as rising above the "grubbiness of self-interest, control by elites for their own benefit" (Box, 2005, p. 97). Pragmatism involves collaborative discussion and decision-making with citizens. Pragmatism is most effective when citizens are able to participate fully in the development of solutions, thereby minimizing the ability of those with power to circumvent citizen-driven solutions. One of the strengths of pragmatism is its applicability to problematic public administration situations. A process of purposeful inquiry is used to link the problem with a realistic solution that has meaning in the real world (Shields, 2008, p. 206). Past practice and tradition do not have inordinate sway over decisions made pragmatically, because in such decisions the solution must fit the problem and respect the individual needs of involved citizens (Box, 2005, p. 98). Pragmatism identifies a sure measure for success: Does the solution work? The definition of a

successful solution is vital. The solution as defined must work for citizens. It should avoid future problems, and its benefit for society must be more than its cost. Larger societal benefits and long-term success are not a required solution with pragmatism (Box, 2005, p. 98).

As stated above, pragmatism has appeal for the public administrator who is interested in solutions and forward-thinking, but it also entails risk. Pragmatism is limited by its definition of success. It only counts workable solutions as successes—and solutions may be based on the values of those defining the solutions (Box, 2005, p. 98). Pragmatist solutions do not necessarily consider the happiness of residents or the overall benefit to society. When pragmatism is more deeply explored, the same questions arise as were discussed with regard to public discourse. Can citizens contribute freely and be assured their ideas will be reflected in the implemented solutions? Will those in power prioritize their policy objectives over citizen concerns? Will citizens opt out of the process as they realize that their contributions have little effect? The pragmatic administrator will not consider these questions when thinking about the success of governance. The only question to be answered is whether the solution works—does it make governing easier and more effective? Under pragmatism an effective government does not care whether the citizens have contributed freely, nor will the administrator be concerned about placing the public will over the objectives of the people in power or of the administrator. Public administrators must temper their pragmatism by adopting broader measures of success. This dynamic was identified by Stivers, who "according to McSwite, is interested in finding ways to accommodate discourse to existing patterns of power so that administrators and citizens can form better relationships" (Box, 2005, p. 98). Governing must be more than a workable solution. The happiness of residents must be considered along with adherence to the guiding principles of utopia.

Pragmatism introduces other public administration constraints as well. The theorists who developed pragmatism believed people could govern their own communities, using their own beliefs and solutions to fit their unique situation. Box identifies several issues related to this framework, including whether citizens know there is a problem to be solved, whether they can come together to formulate a solution, and whether the power elites will take over the process to ensure their own objectives are met. Conditions in society today are simply not conducive to pragmatic solutions (Box, 2005, pp. 103–104). It is possible, however, for a modified pragmatic approach to be more successful. The public administrator in utopia must lead residents to consider the issue at hand rather than wait for them to discover a solution. Administrators will be more successful if they remind residents of their own guiding principles and help to formulate solutions true to the principles while meeting resident needs. Pragmatism can be successful if it is more broadly implemented to accommodate the higher-level goals and needs of utopia.

Critical Theory and Utopia: The Happy Consciousness?

Marcuse identified the concept of the "happy consciousness—the belief that the real is rational and the system delivers the goods" (Box, 2005, p. 58). This concept describes a mindset of the public that prevents discourse effectiveness and limits the capacity of citizens for self-governance. Modern culture is subject to public institutions, business advertising, and cultural conventions that all tend to limit individuality and reward compliance (Bronner, 2011, p. 79). A utopian society can start out as a governance structure relying on transparent information sharing and open public discourse; the ultimate goal of utopia is to reach self-governance through the will of the citizens. Over time, however, individuality and critical reasoning become less admirable. Mass media gain dominance, and citizens surrender their opinions to organizations and bureaucracies. Consensus becomes more important than discussion, and the solutions offered are within a narrow range of debate (Bronner, 2011, p. 83). Citizens are happy and contented, dedicated to their sports teams, schools, and towns. The importance of participation in government escapes their notice—people no longer understand the value of public discourse or pragmatic solution development. When problems arise (often through one horrific event) citizens turn first to the identified civic and cultural leaders for direction on what the response or solution should be. Their second response is often to fault government administrators for allowing the problem in the first place. Citizens never recognize their own role in the problem, let alone their responsibility for contributing to a solution.

This discussion reminds us that utopia is always at risk of developing the happy consciousness. Once citizens begin to transfer their authority and responsibility to a powerful entity such as business, the media, or a bureaucracy, the promise of utopia is lost. The move from valued individual participation to group inclusion as the top goal of citizens signals the deterioration of public discourse and the loss of pragmatic solutions tailored to the needs of citizens.

CAN UTOPIA OVERCOME CRITICAL THEORY LIMITATIONS?

The utopia described in the first part of this article must guard against the constraints and barriers of critical theory public administration. Utopia relies on open, transparent public discourse to develop solutions to issues. If residents lose their individuality and adopt the opinions of the mass media or business interests, public discourse becomes ineffective. Citizens are disenfranchised, stop contributing, and may even undermine utopian government through negative talk or actions. The possibility of outside control is a threat even from public administrators if they are unable to let go of their own agenda or political goals; the administrator is positioned to take control of the process

and undermine the public will. The role of a public administrator in utopia is described well by O'Leary: "Public managers now find themselves not as unitary leaders of unitary organizations. Instead, they find themselves facilitating and operating in multiorganizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved, or solved easily, by single organizations" (2011, p. 2). O'Leary is describing the difficult task of public administration in today's complex world full of wicked problems, but the description of a facilitator operating in a structure with many organizations and individuals, each of which has its own goals and agendas, also applies to utopian public administration.

Public administrators in utopia face many obstacles. Residents are always at risk of sinking into happy consciousness, eliminating their ability to work toward self-governance. People are comforted by being able to look to others for their opinions and decisions. Life is easier if thought can be no more than checking on what a media authority, employer, or political figure thinks about an issue. Thinking for oneself can be difficult and taxing; residents of utopia may become tired of extensive public discourse and meetings. Over time, the tendency is to allow others to make difficult decisions and solve wicked issues. To the contrary, utopian residents have deep roots in individuality and thinking for themselves. Public administrators can build upon this to keep public discourse open and residents engaged. Even so, the possibility of powerful interests ensnaring residents through media and inclusion in societal groups is a real risk for utopian public administration.

Further, utopian government applies underlying principles to guide its processes and decision-making. The application of basic principles assumes that the residents subscribe to these principles, but under pragmatic critical theory, decisions must be made and solutions implemented in accordance with whatever the public will is at the time. If residents change their guiding principles or decide to ignore the principles adopted, pragmatic theory would accept the change as appropriate. Pragmatism may lead to faster solutions, and it is not concerned with solutions based on sound practice or underlying higher-level principles; this combination could lead a utopian government to constantly change its goals and contradict previous decisions as it seeks quick pragmatic solutions without regard to past practice. Attention to history, methodology based on sound practice, and the use of higher-level principles to test decisions made are all sound governmental practices not promoted in a pragmatic framework.

CONCLUSION

Utopia starts out with underlying principles of operation based on promoting resident participation and self-governance. The transparent sharing of information, extensive reliance on public discourse, and balanced use of techniques to promote community relationships all help to stack the deck on the side of

success for utopia. Over time, utopia could succumb to the effects of political agendas and mass media messages, with residents losing interest in and support for their government. Public administrators are in a position to maintain the structure of resident self-governance if they can avoid the temptation to take control of the process to achieve their own agendas.

Finally, as Bach states, "You are never given a wish without also being given the power to make it true. You may have to work for it, however" (1977, p. 119). This thought brings to mind the difficulty of actually implementing utopia, given the pitfalls of the happy consciousness, the shallowness of pragmatism, and the distinct possibility that public discourse will fall short in educating the public to self-govern. Bach states that we have the power to make a wish come true; a public administrator with a deeply held commitment to transparent public discourse will go far toward successfully implementing a utopian government. The risks are significant, however, and Bach's final statement—"everything in this book may be wrong" (p.180)—plants a seed of doubt that utopian dreams are actually possible. The critical theory public administrator must continue to act like Don Quixote and tilt at windmills until the goal is achieved.

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