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**EDITORS' NOTE**

**PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND APOLOGY**

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At a recent conference on interdisciplinarity and global education, I sat on a panel loosely collected under the title, "Coercion and the State." Along with my paper on ideology and schoolplace violence, we heard papers on the Cambodian genocide and the displacement of the "immoral/moral" dichotomy with an emergent "nonmoral" noncategory. What was remarkable about the panel was not the papers themselves but the conversation that followed, which wove what initially appeared as heterogeneous topics and disciplinary divisions into a meditation on the possibilities of an understanding cognizant of both context and larger structural logic. How can we appreciate the uniqueness of the Cambodian genocide and still situate it within the logic of global capitalism? How might schoolplace violence be conceptualized in sociopolitical terms that do not deny the lived necessity of providing safe schools for children? And how might nonmoral displace immoral/moral in a way that values difference in the other and recognizes real imbalances in economic and political power?

The "truth" that emerged from the fluidity of this encounter was the difficulty not of wedding "theory" to "praxis" (for indeed this distinction belongs on the scrap pile with public-private, fact-value and politics-administration) but rather the challenge of what to do with two truths—for instance, the truth of school violence as a possible act of political resistance and the truth of the need of parents to send their children to safe schools. It is the problem of negotiating in the space between the micro that cannot see beyond the demands of its own immediacy and the macro that necessarily homogenizes context in order to recognize logics that connect contexts across diverse geographies and temporalities.

The truth of our situation emerged only by virtue of the openness that the panelists and the listeners made possible by listening. Thus, what began to be "at stake" was not the theoretical positions (of either, variously, "real world" actual events or theoretical postulations of "real world" events) of the individual papers nor the expected return on our ego investment in them but the conversation itself and the truth reproduced therein. I choose the word "reproduced" carefully because it denotes a displaced origin, a spring without a source, that is indicative not only of the contingency of

the reproduced truth but also of the subjectivities between whom it emerges. To do all this demands a significant commitment to a movement beyond familiar signposts, rituals and constellations of meanings that silently, but diligently, construct and solidify our individual identities. It demands what Deleuze called the "deterritorialization" of our selves, a mapping and remapping that is cognizant of our limitations, yet aspires to explore them.<sup>1</sup>

This deterritorialization understandably provokes anxiety and even fear; and as the perception of threat intensifies we may be driven to protect ourselves, as nations protect and defend their borders, or government agencies protect their "turf." It all entails a high degree of risk, the assumption of which is possible only in an open and trusting space, at the door of which suppositions and agendas must be checked. Failure on this score not only undermines the potentiality of the situation, but also threatens to further expose those who are already in a position of vulnerability. This, in turn, may exacerbate latent power inequalities and foster a punitive atmosphere infused with resentment. Let me share a story that will assist in illustrating this point and help make a connection with my comments about situational truth above.

A cohort of graduating MPA students recently completed a seminar that was to serve as a synthesis of their program. At the end of the course, which culminated in a weekend retreat, many students expressed that they felt their trust had been violated and the discursivity of the classroom had been foreclosed by an alienating, often hostile, pedagogy. The dynamic was a complex one, however, as evidenced by the powerful comment made by an African-American woman from the class. In observing the general sentiment of resentment and alienation, she said that those students now know how she feels every day of her life. The force and form of her statement should give us all pause for in it we have the potential for new understanding, a possibility that arises through new experience. Yet it is also deeply problematic that I *cannot* know how she feels without depriving her unique experiences of their context and content. Because these experiences are profoundly *not* and cannot be the same, there remains an equal potential for greater *mis*-understanding and resentment. Inflicting pain to match

pain, implicitly deriving satisfaction from the imposition of punishment, is an ideology of combat that cannot open the space needed for us to understand another's alienation and degradation. This experience cannot arrive in the impossibility of us re-experiencing the other's pain by extracting pain in return, but rather, only through conversations that "create an open interpersonal space between people"<sup>2</sup> and appreciate the considerable risks of this encounter.

However, there remains an important issue, namely, apology. In the story above, there remains an unresolved legacy of abuse both in terms of pedagogy *and* the very real historical and social abuses implicit in the statement made by this African-American student. Again, in this problem, we are represented with the difficulty of negotiating context and logic. How are we to preserve the uniqueness of individual suffering and request for apology and at the same time address the need for larger, more general, societal demands for restitution and reparations? And can we do it without exacting punishment and fostering resentment among those who clearly benefit from existing power relations? It is a formidable challenge. Writing of apology and the tragedy of the Korean "comfort women," Norma Field writes that "In the face of historic and, humanly produced catastrophe, the capacity to feel and express remorse and empathy for the victims' pain is indispensable. This is precisely what makes public, historical apology so difficult. Citizens' groups may be better at 'reflecting' sorrow, but governmental officials embody the abstract institution that attests to the truth. Hence, the question ... of representational quality."<sup>3</sup> More and more questions.

In public administration, commitment to creating space to ask these questions has been met by the "discourse movement." As O.C. McSwite writes, "The discourse perspective prescribes relationships that create open interpersonal space between people. The unconscious finds open space and flows into it, producing new resolutions to issues where, otherwise, there would be blockage."<sup>4</sup> The statement is particularly trenchant because it connects the many blockages of ego and identity with the blockages of social and policy processes.

The field remains, however, fundamentally ahistorical and with little self-reflexivity. It has been, again, McSwite, who in *Legitimacy and Public Administration*,<sup>5</sup> initiated an excavation of the field's history and its epistemological assumptions. In examining its own history, public administration needs to begin to understand that questions of racism, sexism, institutionalized and institutionally-perpetrated and -

perpetuated violence are not the sole domain of "non-professional" social science disciplines, for ultimately abuses by "government" have been abuses by public administrators. If the "government" has been responsible for perpetuating racism and other social cancers, then necessarily public administrators have not simply been complicit but guilty for these abuses. The field has lingered and concealed itself for long enough behind a veneer of dichotomies and a cult of neutral competence that has shielded individuals from "responsibility" to others, the responsibility of relationship, at the same time it has attempted to pinpoint blame and mete out punishment. It denies its responsibility to its citizenry and then ponderously wonders why people have lost faith in "government."

The importance of this "unblocking" is borne out clearly by the articles in this issue, all of which describe critical issues that possess extraordinary inter-group and interpersonal complexity. Ellyn Krevitz outlines the political dynamic of trash importation to Virginia, which involves industry, grassroots organizations, Virginia state legislators, and other state governments, and cleaves along surprising political lines. John Eric Uggen describes the demands that new information technology will make on the public administrator to rethink her role as a fixed center of expertise and to refashion herself more as a facilitator or "hub" within the organization. Wendy Wierzbicki examines the possibility for Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) to bring citizens, developers and government together in a way that both uniquely makes economic development possible and encourages trust among its partners through assumed risk in a common enterprise. Finally, Meredith Gore and Patricia Doerr consider how to save endangered fish in the Pacific Northwest. Here, too, we see a complex dynamic of interests and stakeholders. It is a remarkable collection of perspectives that will illuminate the possibilities of discourse.

The process of opening public administration must begin with stern and critical self-examination within the context of the many demanding questions asked in this note. This is a process that must begin with a discourse of apology in which public administration academics and practitioners finally begin to listen outside of familiar and solidified institutional and ego representations. Apology is a painful undertaking. In the best instances it opens a space for authentic empathic understanding that does not wash away pain but compels the other to share in its burden. For public administration, this apology is long overdue.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Seventh edition. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992 [1974]).

<sup>2</sup> O.C. McSwite, "On the Discourse Movement—A Self-Interview," *Administrative Theory and Praxis* 22 (March 2000): 61.

<sup>3</sup> Norma Field, "War and Apology: Japan, Asia, the Fiftieth and After," *positions* 5 (Spring 1997): 34.

<sup>4</sup> McSwite, 61.

<sup>5</sup> O.C. McSwite, *Legitimacy in Public Administration, A Discourse Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1997).

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