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Theses on College and University Administration: A Critical Perspective

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Does the "body of knowledge" comprising administrative theory in higher education fully capture, or even approximate, the realities experienced by faculty, staff, and students in a hierarchical, exploitative, and authoritarian organizational environment? Administrative theory is based overwhelmingly upon a philosophy and method that inappropriately assume a consensus of values and perspectives about the structure, purpose, and role of colleges and universities. Further, much of the literature on higher education leadership and organization assumes that the personnel, culture, goals, and offices within colleges and universities function to produce outcomes that are intended and valued by the participants and constituents of learning organizations. The research literature on higher educational administration makes assumptions about the external social and political context that ignores the many ways in which individuals are exploited and abused by the state and private capital in our society. Despite the fine work of critical scholars and journals like *Workplace*, the preponderance of administrative theory, research, news, gossip, and publicity in higher education promotes an heroic conception of leadership and celebrates hierarchy and authority over alternative structures, values and goals.

The fundamental problem of the study of higher education administration is that it is dominated by an *ontological* assumption that persons are passive receptacles of external stimuli and that their social relationships are appropriately structured by political and economic elites. It is also based upon an *epistemological* assumption that the goal of social inquiry is to establish an identity between thought and object so that scientific, policy, and managerial elites can manage persons and their social relationships.

Opposed to a *correspondence* theory of truth and an *externally mediated* theory of human action is a philosophy of liberation based on the notion that human freedom, which can be understood as self-conscious self-determination, is the most appropriate goal of inquiry into social relations and the knowledge process. If human beings are to be studied appropriately, they must be understood as the real or potential creators of their social and symbolic environments. An important goal of inquiry into colleges and

universities as organizations is the critique of obstacles to individuals teaching, studying, and working as humans in their *species being*.

What would administrative theory look like if we viewed an academic organization in conflict and crisis from the perspective of those at the base of the organizational pyramid? What if we rejected the assumption that colleges and universities are universal and eternal havens of collegiality, rationality, and equity? What if we opened analyses up to include exploitation, predation, and alienation among the core, not peripheral, experiences of faculty, staff, and students in American colleges and universities? What if we approached the "body of knowledge" about administration in colleges and universities from the perspective of a critical theory of knowledge, organization, and individuality? What if we studied the administration of colleges and universities from the standpoint of a philosophy of liberation?

Here are some thoughts that (1) challenge some fundamental ideas about administration, (2) examine administration in a broader social and political context, and (3) suggest some implications about the person's struggle for meaning and justice within alienated and hostile academic environments

1. Within higher education, the distinction between management and leadership is irrelevant as far as the academic mission of the institution is concerned. Despite the pronouncements of administrators and policy makers, colleges and universities are neither managed nor led as faculty, staff, and students attempt to meet the teaching, scholarship, and service functions of higher education.

2. A fundamental observation about higher education organization is that the administrative structure does not function to meet the academic and academic support needs of faculty, staff, and students. Much of what passes as organizational failure and incompetence is actually a misunderstanding of the role of administration: it does not exist to meet the needs of persons teaching, studying, and learning in colleges and universities. It exists to meet its own needs and those of powerful external constituencies. As a result, longevity as an administrator and upward movement in the administrative lattice have little to do with either management or leadership skills in the academic life of the institution.

3. The Peter Principle does not operate in higher education. Certainly, administrators find their level of incompetence, usually sooner rather than later, but that does not preclude their upward movement in the hierarchy. The Peter Principle is based on the assumption that the performance of roles at the apex of the organization requires superior competence. In higher education, competence matters only at the base of the organization to achieve the teaching, scholarship, and service missions of colleges and universities. Competent performance in the organization is necessary only by departmental administrative assistants, faculty, and students. Beginning at the level of departmental chair and proceeding upward, "effective administration" is

largely a *non sequitur* as far as the academic life of colleges and universities is concerned.

4. Effective administration has meaning only in terms of the organization's external relationship to the state and private capital. Administrative teams are ultimately functionaries who impose the power of the state and private capital on faculty, students, and staff. Effectiveness is defined by the administrative team's responsiveness to the state and capital, which are primarily the enforcement of state policy and the maximization of profit. Administration exists to enforce state policy and the culture and norms of state capitalism.

5. Accountability, therefore, is not a reciprocal or interactive dynamic within colleges and universities. Accountability is a one-way process of surveillance and subordination of faculty, students, and staff to the policy dictates of political and economic elites. Colleges and universities are not sanctuaries and they are not autonomous. They are elements of the state capitalist system. As such, they both reflect and reinforce the basic organizational principles of state capitalism: organizational resources are mobilized to expand the control of the state over individuals and groups in order to maximize profit, and to ensure political order through obedience to political and corporate authority. The reduction of management and leadership skills in higher education to the service of the state and private capital provides an organizational field for corrupt and predatory behaviors to emerge and flourish.

6. Within the organization, administration is its own end and administrative redundancy is the most significant measure of its success. Since administration intends to expand infinitely the control of the state and capital over individuals and society, administration succeeds only to the extent that it generates more administrative work. Some of the work generated by administration may be performed by expanding the administrative lattice. However, much of it is also performed by faculty and staff under the rubric "institutional service." Thus, a significant portion of faculty and staff work replicates and extends administrative control.

7. Strategic management, personnel evaluation, assessment, and public relations are the primary means by which administration expands its control over faculty, students, and staff. "Accountability" is the fixed idea that legitimates predation and the expansion of administrative control.

8. Academic labor is indistinguishable from other forms of labor in its relationship to the administrative hierarchy. Academic workers are wage earners and subject to organizational policies and the state and corporate policy environment that governs colleges and universities. As such, faculty are increasingly de-skilled and marginalized from significant institutional decision-making. De-skilling is manifest in the imposition of *administrivia* on faculty work roles. Marginalization of faculty is manifest in the appropriation of

traditional faculty responsibilities by administration. De-skilling and marginalization are mutually reinforcing processes dictated by the changing function of higher education in state capitalist society.

9. Critical thinking and administrative practice cannot be reconciled. Critical thinking adopts the method of negation and the style of critique. Critical thinking assesses the validity of knowledge according to articulated standards or principles. Administration based on management consensus, organizational hierarchy, or state policy directives subordinates knowledge to authority and precludes commitment to standards, principles, or philosophic ideals. Administration is the abandonment of method and the negation of style.

10. Administrative antics that acquire the labels of "failure" or "malfeasance" typically entail the *mea culpa* at some juncture. As a quasi-apology, the administrative *mea culpa* is a symbolic and ideological act that dramatizes two things: First, the institution is vulnerable, but infallible. Second, the administrator is fallible, but invulnerable.

11. In the administrative *mea culpa*, "A" is no longer "A." It is only in the act of quasi-apologizing that administrators acknowledge the existence of alienation, mystification, and predation in the organization. In the *mea culpa*, organizational process and relationships temporarily suspend their meaning and the simplistic, linear character that administrators assume them to have. In the quasi-apology, as with any socially-defined administrative failure, process and relationships acquire complexity and ambiguity, but only temporarily. Once the *mea culpa* is ritualistically validated by powerful institutional elites, the appearance of equilibrium is re-established in the organization. Organizational process and social relationships once again become linear and simplistic in the administrative narrative.

12. The commencement speech, like all forms of institutional dramaturgy, is the doppelganger of the administrative *mea culpa*. Both are reinforcements of the administrative hierarchy and ideological narrative. The commencement speech converts the accomplishments of faculty and students into organizational accomplishments and, thus, reifies the organization into an active agent. The *mea culpa* converts administrative abuse into systemic failure, reifying the organization as an active agent. The *mea culpa* insists that the abuse or malfeasance would not have occurred if only the administration "had known." The organization becomes Frankenstein's monster in the *mea culpa* because systemic ignorance prevents the rescue of the victims by the benevolent heroes at the apex of the administrative hierarchy. The *mea culpa* converts administrators into the victims of their own information systems.

13. Administration equates itself with the institution, or it reduces the institution to the administration. Administrative aspirations, experiences, and activities are

elevated above, and attempt to subsume, the myriad aspirations, experiences, and complex interactions of faculty, students, and staff.

14. The reduction of the institution to the administration is especially pronounced in times of crisis, or when the administration is publicly challenged or humiliated. University lawyers lose their responsibility for the institution as a whole and become the counsel for individual administrators in their struggle against students, faculty, and staff. Public relations offices lose responsibility for the entire institution and function to protect or repair the image of administrators. The organization loses its public or intersubjective character and becomes the private property of administrators. Organizational levers and processes are mobilized as weapons to discredit opponents and neutralize challenges from individuals who are stigmatized as malcontents through the many forms of direct and ideological control available to the administration.

15. Administrative rhetoric and practices that marginalize faculty and students from decision making and cultural production clarify as much as they obfuscate. In concert with all authoritarian ideology, administrative forms of reality construction *obfuscate* by negating the participation and individuality of students, faculty, and staff. Yet, administrative practices that marginalize faculty, staff and, students from decision making also *clarify* because they contradict the false appearance of collegiality and shared governance, laying bare the real rules governing social relationships in higher education. The primary task of administration is to manage restive individuals and groups through both direct and ideological social control.

16. Grievance processes falsely dramatize the organization's interest in equity and justice. Grievance systems enable the administration to collect information to discredit the grievant and protect the administrator and the institution. Grievances enable the organization to "cool out" the protest of victims of administrative behavior by demonstrating the futility of resistance, or by preparing the administrative apparatus to defend itself against a lawsuit. At their root, grievance processes are forms of surveillance that inform organizational responses to challenges to administrative hegemony.

17. Faculty senates and collective bargaining units have little function in higher education beyond the ritual subjugation of faculty to administrative, economic, and state power. Targets of administrative abuse are either left to their own resources to fight the organization, or they are forced to band with other targets in spontaneous and unmediated forms of rebellion that do not fit neatly within the universe of administratively sanctioned behaviors.

18. Organizational and legal forms of advocacy for faculty, staff, and students typically arrive too late on the scene to help victims of administrative abuse. Moreover, the responses of faculty senates and unions function to reinforce administrative power and authority, usually under the guise of "shared

governance" or "collective bargaining." Institutional reviews of managerial practice prompted by advocacy groups only promote the delusion of improving "administrative effectiveness" in meeting organizational goals of equity and justice.

19. Administrative exploitation, abuse, and predation have potential consequences at many levels, including the material, intellectual, and psychological dimensions of the person. However, these dimensions can be separated only for analytical purposes. Individuals are totalities, not fragments; they are not a collection of disjointed analytic categories. Therefore, an administrative assault against a person at any one of these levels is likely to be interpreted and experienced as an assault at each level of an individual's existence.

20. The recognition that the person is a totality reveals why administration can never contribute to the liberation or the material, cultural, or social well-being of the individual: to an administrator, the person can never be a totality, an "end in himself," or "morally autonomous." To an administrator, the person is always subordinate to the organizational constraints imposed by the department, the school, the college, the institution, the state system, the governing board, and the law. The function of administration is to ensure the subordination of the person to the organization; administration seeks to meet the needs of the organization, not the person. Following Max Weber, the person experiences the academic organization as an "iron cage from which there is no escape."

21. An important component of the individual's self-defense against the administration is to take as much pride in one's enemies as in one's friends. Enemies help define, clarify, and dramatize our values and principles as much as friends. The acquisition of an administrative enemy is certainly a potential threat to a person's material well-being, but it is not a necessary threat to the person's values, intellect, sense of integrity, or self-concept. Moreover, the acquisition of an administrative enemy may be evidence of the individual's challenge to the hegemony of the administration. The opposition of individuals to exploitation, abuse, and predation is a legitimate and important source of self and a precondition for fully reciprocal, fully human social relationships. As individuals attempt to meet their needs and emancipate themselves from organizational constraints, the acquisition of administrative enemies is inevitable.

22. Administrative enemies are particularly helpful in clarifying and bolstering the individual's sense of integrity since they represent the fraudulent authority of large organizations to abuse and exploit the person. Everyday experiences with administrative enemies bring into high resolution the mismatch between the fraudulent advertised values of higher education and its abusive practice. The targeted person can value or appreciate the acquisition of an administrative

enemy as a form of principled opposition or legitimate resistance to administratively sanctioned abuse and exploitation.

23. Collective forms of resistance are always possible and occasionally helpful, but they are dependent, in the first instance, on the principled resistance of the person to concrete manifestations of predation, abuse, and exploitation by organizational elites.

John F. Welsh retired in 2007 from his position as Professor of Higher Education at the University of Louisville. He won multiple awards for the quality of his teaching, the originality of his research, and the breadth of his service. He published in the major research journals in higher education and social science. He is the author of *After Multiculturalism: The Politics of Race and the Dialectics of Liberty* (Lexington Books, 2008). His web site is www.johnfwelsh.com.