

Introduction

All cultures have myths and hold on to many of them tightly. Myths can be powerful stories to inspire individual and collective action; yet can blur the views of reality. Myths are important to national, organizational, and individual identities. Conventional thinking defines myths as being both true and false at varying degrees. We often take the myths of our own culture or group as truths, which then guide our beliefs and much of our behavior in varying contexts. A myth can be a story or narrative understood by all regardless of education or intelligence, and is often more satisfying to the emotions and the imagination than to the intellect (Cohen, 1969). Myths often emphasize certain aspects of a story over others. They can be useful tools that may be well or poorly used. They need to be examined carefully as there may be hidden meanings in the narratives we often unquestionably accept as true. Some of these truths are so pervasive we subconsciously allow them to dominate our thinking, create bias, and guide our behavior. Only when myths remain unexamined do they retain their power. In many ways, public administration (PA) is bound by accepted, unquestioned, and in many ways protected myths, which constrain creative thinking.

This symposium seeks to unravel and deflate the power of myths. It argues PA theory and practice is heavily burdened by mythical untruths that appeal to powerful people and organizations. PA thinking and practice will remain constrained until these untruths are challenged.

This symposium on the “Mythical World of Public Administration” aims to stimulate theorizing about this practical difficulty. It consists of six papers from thinkers and practitioners well known in the PA literature:

- (1) “Sub-administration: ideologies, myths and metaphors” by David John Farmer argues that PA theory and practice should become more sensitive to its sub-administration – including ideologies, myths, and metaphors that contribute like an unconscious in shaping (and misshaping) governmental policy and administration. Examples are given. It is recommended that, for analytical purposes, PA should turn toward post-traditional PA, including the insights of post-modernism and epistemic pluralism.
- (2) “Making use of an enduring public administration myth: refusal, subjective identification and the public interest” by Gary Marshall focuses on the myth of public interest. The paper discusses whether the myth functions as a form of resistance to change, and it argues for the relevance of David Farmer’s concept of anti-administration and O.C. McSwite’s idea of administrative refusal. It recommends a refusal of subjective identification with public interest.
- (3) “Myths and errors and inventions: the shadow of tradition in PA praxis” by Ricardo Schmuckler focuses on founding myths. It analyzes and argues for the impossibility of segregating founding myths from what is explained as any actual understanding of life in common. Among its many references, the paper reminds us of the beautiful 1972 quote from President John F. Kennedy that points out “The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie – deliberately contrived and dishonest – but the myth – persistent, pervasive and unrealistic [...]”
- (4) “The public pursuit of closure: losses, fictions, and endings” by Patricia Patterson examines the myth of closure. It also analyzes parts played by PA practice in



response to the subtexts of death, love, and loss; and it discusses the comforts of administrative and narrative fictions. The paper also analyzes related topics such as the metaphor of closing the books. It is a paper with, as it were, a happy ending.

- (5) "Neutrality as it never was: a short treatise on public administration theory" by Hugh Miller turns to the topic of neutral PA. It asks whether PA is indeed neutral. And it does so by surveying five main schools of thought. At the same time, it argues that PA is a political institution.
- (6) "Governance myths: a typology" by Aaron Wachhaus offers a typology of governance myths. It proposes a classification, discussing each type through examples. It argues that such a classification can facilitate insight into civil society and good governance. Governance in this case is a larger category than merely what is governmental.

Welcome, readers, to The Mythical World of Public Administration.

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Reference

Cohen, P.S. (1969), "Theories of myth", *Man* (New Series), Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 337-353.