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## QUESTION THE SYSTEM

This note was prepared for the Minnowbrook 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference, held at Blue Mountain Lake, New York in August 2018.

The twenty years following World War II were wonderful for people in authority. Writers had to invent a new vocabulary to describe this golden age. It was era of the Establishment<sup>1</sup> and the power elite<sup>2</sup>, the administrative state<sup>3</sup>, the technostructure<sup>4</sup> and the organization man.<sup>5</sup> It was the age of centrism and consensus politics<sup>6</sup>; the end of ideology and the end of sectionalism too.<sup>7</sup>

By 1968 all this had changed. Throughout the western world, the Establishment was under attack. Consensus and deference were history. In the United States and Europe, young people were bucking the system. They were fighting the Man. They were taking it to the streets. They were demanding power to the people.

The technostructure, once admired for rationality and efficiency, was out of favor in 1968. Now the power structure was perceived to be amoral and repressive. Decisionmakers fetishized data but lacked vision. Ordinary people were trapped in routines that punished creative expression. People were alienated, caught up in the rat race, imprisoned in an iron cage of production and consumption. The response, Herbert Marcuse said, should be a “great refusal” of the status quo.<sup>8</sup>

The rebellious mood was so strong that it penetrated into the conservative bones of public administration. In September 1968, thirty-four young scholars gathered at the Minnowbrook Conference Center in upstate New York to judge their field. The meeting was raucous.<sup>9</sup> People refused to follow the program. There were interventions and confrontations. One participant praised Mario Savio, the activist who urged Berkeley students to shut down the educational-corporate machine by throwing their “bodies on the gears.”<sup>10</sup>

Not everyone at Minnowbrook was ready to go that far. But most agreed that the Establishment should be challenged in some way. Frank Marini said that one of the main themes of the conference was anti-bureaucratism.<sup>11</sup> Orion White called on scholars to confront the lack of honesty and openness in major institutions.<sup>12</sup> The “spirit of rebellion” surfaced again at the 1970 conference of the American Society for Public Administration, where “young-minded administrators” challenged the old guard and boycotted the official program.

Minnowbrook, it has been said, “is a spirit of questioning authority.”<sup>13</sup> Is that spirit alive today? We should hope so, because the power of the educational-corporate machine has not weakened over the last fifty years. On the contrary, it has increased. Today, young scholars are caught in a system that imposes even tighter restrictions on their work. The rat race of the 1960s has accelerated. The iron cage is more confining.

Over decades, the field of public administration has been marketized, rationalized and corporatized. There is more competition among graduate programs, more concern for compliance with external standards, and more anxiety about the *US News and World Report* ranking. The market for academic labor is tougher as well. Because of austerity and adjunctification, it is hard for new scholars to find jobs. Schools perceive that highly productive faculty are essential for a high ranking, and they define productivity more narrowly. Faculty are expected to maintain a

steady flow of articles in high-status journals. The status of journals is dictated by impact-factor ranking, as reported by Clarivate Analytics, a multinational corporation. The business of running journals also been rationalized. Today, all top journals are owned or run by multinational corporations. Just one of these multinationals owns or manages most of the top ten journals in public administration.

In many ways, the system that binds young scholars today is exactly what the generation of 1968 sought to avoid. Here are seven reasons why it deserves to be challenged:

— The whole system is less rational than it looks. Students who rely on the *US News* ranking to choose graduate programs believe that they are making careful, well-informed decisions. They do not know how the ranking is calculated or the shakiness of its foundation. Their decisionmaking has the appearance of rationality but not the substance of it. Similarly, hiring and P&T committees assume that the Clarivate ranking of a journal says something meaningful about the worth of articles published within it. This is also a questionable assumption. Among other difficulties, Clarivate rankings are distorted by patterns of self-citation within small groups of scholars.

— The system is exploitative. Journal publishing is a profitable business. It is profitable because new scholars are forced to surrender their property without compensation to publishers. This gives publishers the power to extract rents from university libraries. These rents bear no clear relationship to the value that is added by publishers to the published work. Publishers also take advantage of the voluntary labor of editors and reviewers. At the same time, authors and reviewers give up personal and professional information as they comply with the ever-increasing demands of manuscript management systems.

— The system is secretive. In the last quarter-century, academics have written volumes about the virtues of transparency. We are big boosters of transparency. And we live with transparency too: salaries for public sector academics are routinely disclosed, and many scholars advocate for more disclosure of data and methods. When it comes to the business of scholarly publishing, however, there is awkward silence. Exactly how much rent do journal publishers collect for each of their journals? How much of this rent is shared with academic organizations? What do publishers do with the data harvested by manuscript management systems?

— The system encourages productivism. That is, production for its own sake. Scholars are expected to make or beat the quota. The unit of production is defined narrowly: 10,000-word (roughly) articles published in the right places. We do not count false starts and dead ends. Between 2007 and 2016, the number of articles published in Clarivate-ranked journals in public administration doubled. Does this equate to a doubling of understanding? Not necessarily. Many of these articles will never be referenced by another author. Some were safe bets, produced to make quota. They made small adjustments to existing knowledge. What we may have lost, in the drive to increase production, is the original thought that comes out of reflection, experimentation and failure.

— The system discourages creativity. In some programs, new faculty are required to publish in journals at the very top of the Clarivate ranking. As a result, the choice of topics and methods is constrained by the preferences of those journals. Scholars who have doubts about these topics and methods are told that they can address those doubts after they gain tenure. This is a fib, because institutional and market pressures remain strong even then. In any case, habits of scholarly production are ingrained by that point.

— The system is geographically biased. Top journals in public administration are dominated by scholars from a small handful of developed countries, and in particular from the United States and United Kingdom. The governance agenda that is described in these journals does not include some of the most serious problems facing most people in the world. The same complaint can be made about major conferences in the field.

— The system is inflexible. The machine is good at producing certain kinds of knowledge: mainly, the kind that was useful for the developed West at the time the machine was designed in the 1970s to 1990s. But circumstances change. However, the system of scholarly production is so rigid that it has trouble adapting to new realities. It is like the auto industry in Detroit in the 1970s and 1980s, with the critical difference that the Anglo-American scholarly production system does not yet face significant foreign competition. It can continue manufacturing ill-suited products for a lot longer.

There are several things that we can do to challenge this system. We could stop using unreliable, commercially-generated rating schemes. We could set up non-profit, open access journals, and promise young scholars that they will not be penalized for turning to them. We could demand transparency from journal owners about finances and the use of harvested information. We could insist that editorial teams and conferences have adequate representation from outside the Anglosphere and northwest Europe. We could create space for scholars to write more freely about big ideas. We could encourage the writing of shorter works and longer works. We could stop penalizing false starts and dead ends. At annual conferences, we could routinize the practice of pausing to question the conventional wisdom. We could create our own disciplinary “red teams.”

We could do all this. But will we? Some of us do well by the status quo. And some young scholars live so precariously that it would be rash to challenge the status quo. Maybe this is the

real test of whether the Minnowbrook spirit is still alive. No one has to throw their body upon the machine. We just need to pull together, commit to meaningful change, and follow through.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Richard H. Rovere, "Notes on the Establishment in America," *The American Scholar* 30, no. 4 (1961): 489-495.

<sup>2</sup> C. Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Dwight Waldo, *The Administrative State* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1948).

<sup>4</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> William Hollingsworth Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York,: Simon and Schuster, 1956).

<sup>6</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Vital Center* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949); Charles Lindblom, "The Science of 'Muddling Through'," *Public Administration Review* 19, no. 2 (1959): 79-88.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964).

<sup>9</sup> Rosemary O'Leary, David Van Slyke, and Soonhee Kim, *The Future of Public Administration around the World: The Minnowbrook Perspective* (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Marini, *Toward a New Public Administration* (Scranton, PA: Chandler Pub. Co., 1971), 57.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Rosemary O'Leary, "Minnowbrook: Tradition, Idea, Spirit, Event, Challenge," *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21 (2011): i1-i6, i3.