

NOTE

PAT-NET: HOME FOR PHILOSOPHERS

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Koos Pauw (Department of Public Administration, Unisa) attended the annual PAT-Net (Public Administration Theory Network) conference in Leiden, Netherlands, in 2001 on invitation. He writes as follows:

‘The conference met all my expectations. To my delight, I discovered a salon frequented by philosophers in Public Administration. PAT-Net is a small but academically substantial group of scholars surrounding a coregroup who have been working together for a number of years in the meta-theory of Public Administration. Although the network is mainly based in the United States of America (USA) – this was the first annual conference held outside the USA – it has members on all continents. The network manages a refereed journal (*Administrative Theory and Praxis*) and holds an annual conference. This conference was entitled, “Changing Discourses: Democracy, Institutions and Civic Space”.

‘All academic subjects have their philosophers or meta-theoreticians with, one supposes, their networks. Whether they are all as institutionalised as PAT-Net, I do not know. The reason why the existence of PAT-Net is so pleasing is that there is an inherent tension between philosophy and bureaucracy. O F White (1995) wrote, probably correctly at the time, that Public Administration was philosophically the least sophisticated social science. At universities, schools and departments of Public Administration (unfortunately, sometimes called “Public Management” in South Africa) which train people to be good or better bureaucrats, have a problem. The problem is that to be a good bureaucrat is generally to be politically correct, whereas political correctness is not exactly the hallmark of excellence in science and philosophy.

‘It is within this tension that the delightful electricity of PAT-Net is generated. Some of the most prominent thinkers and authors in Public Administration are members and attended the conference: Jay White, George Frederickson, Hugh Miller and Camilla Stivers, to name a few. There were more than 50 presentations on the programme.

‘A wide range of issues was discussed. Many presentations were theoretical or

philosophical, but this did not exclude the consideration of concrete cases and problems. Although the New Public Administration featured in some of the sessions, and especially around the use of *governance* as a concept, the impression was created that this approach had passed its zenith as the “flavour of the day”, among Public Administration theorists. Where it did come up in one of the sessions I attended, it was in the context of practical problems regarding public-private partnerships and ministerial responsibility in respect of “arms-length”, public institutions.

PAT-net is an environment where post-modernists, critical theorists and gender theorists find a home. A number of the discussions dealt with topics on language and narrative within these discourses. As behoves consciously *avant-garde* thinkers, established truths such as the existence of the state, the distinction between public and private and ‘administration itself’ (whatever that means) were questioned in some quarters. At the same time, some well-curried themes are still on the table: the nature of democracy and representation, citizen participation and democratic discourse, communication and persuasion, and even the politics – administration dichotomy that is still alive and well after many public funerals. The effects of globalisation on the state and bureaucracy also came up in the debates.

Analytical philosophy was also represented. It featured, among other things, in a discussion of pluralism in relation to the work of Isaiah Berlin and others. As is to be expected, this discussion was characterised by fine workmanship in the form of sharp focus and clear exposition, but not necessarily subtle insight. The situation in South Africa was discussed in at least one session where the TRC was dealt with within the context of legitimacy and reconciliation.

One would have expected methodological and ethical issues to be more prominent in a conference on what has become known as “Reflective Public Administration”. As far as I know, research methodology was prominent only in the keynote address by Prof Barbara Czarniawska of Goteborg University who dealt with the way certain stories are remembered and others forgotten in doing research on city government. There was one session with “ethics” in the title which seemingly dealt mainly with the social capital/trust idea.

At the round-table “Reconceptualizing Public Administration”, I was one of five who made presentations. It was very well attended and elicited a lively discussion from the floor. One of the positions I tried to bring across was that a human being is a social being and that the distinction between private and public is an abstraction. The absolutely private does not exist and can, therefore, not be posited as that from which public life is derived, as is done by some forms of Western Liberalism. We are human through other humans – corny, but true.

The participants in the conference as a group have an amazingly strong publishing record. Two books by participants can be mentioned as indicative of where or whereabouts the conference was:

Jay White's *Taking Language Seriously: the Narrative Foundations of Public Administration Research* (1999) and the earlier *Postmodern Public Administration: Towards Discourse* by Charles Fox and Hugh Miller.

'The conversation about the discussion on democracy in the context of serving the public is vibrant. The conference for 2002 is planned for Cleveland, Ohio. (<http://www.pat-net.org/pages/callpaper.html>)'

Fox C J & Miller H T. 1995. *Postmodern Public Administration: Towards Discourse* Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks.

White J D. 1999. *Taking Language Seriously: The Narrative Foundations of Public Administration Research* Georgetown University Press: Washington DC.

White O F. 1995. 'Public Administration's Gender Identity Problem' in *Administration and Society*, vol 27, no. 2: 277–282.