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Why We Should Abandon the Misconceived Quest to Reconcile Public Entrepreneurship with Democracy:

A Response to Bellone and Goerl's "Reconciling Public Entrepreneurship And Democracy"

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Carl J. Bellone and George Frederick Goerl (1992) build an intriguing case for public entrepreneurship. By strategically structuring an argument in the tradition of the bureaucracy/democracy debate, they attempt to legitimize the concept of *public entrepreneurship* by asserting that it can be reconciled with democratic politics and administration.¹ Bellone and Goerl's argument presents the underlying values and characteristics of public entrepreneurship (autonomy, a personal vision of the future, secrecy, and risk-taking) as being at odds with the values of democratic politics and administration (accountability, citizen participation, open policy-making processes, and "stewardship" behavior). Bellone and Goerl suggest that, although these value orientations appear incompatible, this should not be interpreted to mean that the conflict created by the different value orientations cannot be resolved. Indeed, Bellone and Goerl assert that public entrepreneurship can be squared with democratic principles if it is "civic-regarding."

Public entrepreneurs need to take their political authority seriously and follow the principles of democratic theory in policy design and implementation... they also need to be concerned with a more active approach to administrative responsibility which includes helping to facilitate increased citizen education and involvement. We call this civic-regarding entrepreneurship (1992, p. 132).

The authors' concept of civic-regarding entrepreneurship is grounded in the notion that a strong theory of citizenship is essential if we are to make public entrepreneurship compatible with democratic principles. Thus, public administrators have an obligation to search for opportunities that allow the citizenry to actively participate in the public policy process.

Bellone and Goerl have no doubt contributed to the dialogue concerning the appropriate role of public administrators in our democratic government. We have been reminded once again that any role prescribed for public administrators must be compatible with democratic values. They also emphasize the important link between administrative responsibility and increased opportunities for citizenship. This is certainly a meaningful area of scholarly inquiry. As Camilla Stivers (1990a, 1990b) and others have argued, the legitimacy of the administrative state is contingent, in part, upon an active citizenry.² For these reasons and more, Bellone and Goerl should be congratulated for raising several critical issues that deserve our undivided attention.

The Bellone and Goerl piece is equally troubling in some respects. Despite the optimism expressed by these authors about the potential value of public entrepreneurship, the question is not whether public entrepreneurship can be reconciled with democratic values but whether the private enterprise concept of an entrepreneur is an appropriate model for public administration. Unfortunately, I must answer this ques-

tion in the negative and assert that we should abandon the misconceived quest to reconcile public entrepreneurship with democracy. Although seductive and appealing at first glance, the concept of civic-regarding entrepreneurship contains insurmountable problems that render the concept unsuitable for prescribing or describing the role of public administrators in governance. Although Bellone and Goerl have added the term civic-regarding to the concept of entrepreneurship, this does not resolve the problem that the concept of entrepreneur is "misplaced" when applied to public administrators.³

The "Hidden" Values of Public Entrepreneurship

Bellone and Goerl were correct in asserting that the 1980s will be recorded in history as the "age of the entrepreneur." Throughout the decade, academic journals (especially in the field of business management) and the popular press were filled with accounts of entrepreneurial success stories. Many commentators believed that a rekindling of the "entrepreneurial spirit" in the private sector was essential if the United States were to regain its competitiveness in a rapidly changing world that had become increasingly interdependent.⁴

In following a time-honored practice of public administration scholars from the Progressive era to the present, Bellone and Goerl have turned to our business management colleagues in search of answers to the complex problems facing government.⁵ They seem to think that public entrepreneurship is the

answer to “declining federal grants to state and local governments, and the growing fiscal crises faced by governments at all levels of the federal system” (Bellone and Goerl, 1992, p. 130). Their definition of public entrepreneurship might lead one to this conclusion. Public entrepreneurs are said to “seek to find new sources of revenue, besides the more traditional taxes, to increase tax bases through economic development projects and to augment the number of private-public sector entrepreneurs within their boundaries” (p. 130).

In reading the Bellone and Goerl piece, it became readily apparent to me that they recognized the private business concept of entrepreneur as problematic when used to describe or prescribe the role of public administrators in our democratic system. Their need to “legitimize” the concept by structuring an argument that it can be reconciled with democratic principles is an indication that something is wrong. The authors know that the characteristic behaviors of the entrepreneur are not well-suited for public administrators. Although a civic-regarding entrepreneurship may address some of the antidemocratic characteristics of the entrepreneur identified by Bellone and Goerl, it ignores less apparent values intrinsic to the entrepreneurial model such as a heavy reliance on domination and coercion, a preference for revolutionary change (regardless of the circumstances), and a disrespect for tradition.⁶ These “hidden” values make the concept of public entrepreneur suspect for several reasons.

First, the idea of public entrepreneurship cultivates and perpetuates an overly romantic view of public administrators. Public entrepreneurs are depicted as heroes and conquerors who have enormous power that enables them to transform organizational events at their discretion. They are described as having the “need to dominate people inside and beyond their organization” (Doig and Hargrove, 1987, p. 12). To wit, Eugene Lewis’ (1980) discussion of three well-known public entrepreneurs—Hyman Rickover, J. Edgar Hoover, and Robert Moses—illustrates what can happen when public administrators operate under the premise of domination and forced submission. According to Lewis, “All three public entrepreneurs managed to follow strategies leading to undisput-

ed domination over their respective organizations” (p. 9). Any model which explicitly or implicitly sanctions this form of raw power and domination in a democratic society should be rejected out of hand. Critics of bureaucratic power such as Kenneth J. Meier (1987) would certainly agree with this assertion. If I am reading Bellone and Goerl correctly, their sensitivity to and respect for democratic values would lead them to the same conclusion.

The second problem of public entrepreneurship relates to the issue of change. Entrepreneurs are portrayed in the business and public administration literature as innovators. Peter Drucker (1985) made this clear when he stated that “[i]nnovation is the specific tool of entrepreneurs, the means by which they exploit *change* as an opportunity for a different business or a different service” (emphasis added) (p. 18). As a means of creating innovation, public entrepreneurs place a premium on revolutionary or “frame-breaking” changes to use the words of Michael L. Tushman *et al.* (1988). Frame-breaking changes require a radical break from established conduct. Such changes are designed to “upset and disorganize” according to Drucker. The public entrepreneur’s preoccupation with revolutionary changes that “alter greatly existing patterns of allocation of scarce public resources” may not necessarily be in the public interest (Lewis, 1980, p. 9). Revolutionary changes are not appropriate in some instances. There are times when our purposes would be better served if we pursued other courses of action such as defending the existing organization against forces that could undermine its integrity.⁷ Jameson Doig and Erwin Hargrove (1990 [abridged edition], p. 21), leading proponents of the public entrepreneurship model, agree with this fundamental point. Moreover, we must not lose sight of the fact that some changes may do more harm than good. James Q. Wilson (1989) expresses these sentiments in a discussion of executives and innovation. Wilson states: “Innovation is not inevitably good; there are at least as many bad changes as good. And government agencies are especially vulnerable to bad changes because, absent of a market that would impose a fitness test on any organizational change, a changed public bureaucracy can persist in doing wrong things for years” (p. 227).

The final problem with public entrepreneurship relates to the concept of tradition. Carl J. Friedrich’s (1972) seminal work, *Tradition and Authority*, is helpful here. He suggests that tradition is a “set of established values and beliefs having persisted over several generations” (p. 18). According to Friedrich, tradition performs an important function in constitutional governments such as ours because it integrates the political community by providing the “basis of much communication and effective integrative argument” (p. 14). Friedrich makes a convincing argument that tradition and authority are inextricably interwoven. He continues to say that “reasoning from tradition is a key method of authority” (p. 17). Friedrich defines authority as the “capacity for reasoned elaboration” grounded in the funded experience of the political community (see chap. 4).

Friedrich’s work is instructive as it provides additional reasons for why we should reject public entrepreneurship. Public entrepreneurs are, as a rule, anti-traditionalists (Doig and Hargrove, 1987, chap. 1; Lewis, 1980, chap. 1). Tradition is viewed as an impediment to revolutionary change and innovation and thus, is the focus of attack. The antitradition orientation of the public entrepreneur is disconcerting because, as Friedrich and others have so wisely informed us, tradition provides the rational basis for their authority (DeGeorge, 1985; Raz, 1979; Selznick, 1987 and in progress). The public entrepreneur’s disdain and disrespect for tradition creates an interesting dilemma for Bellone and Goerl. As may be recalled, they stated that “Public entrepreneurs need to take their *political authority* seriously” (emphasis added). How is this possible given the fact that the public entrepreneur seems intent on destroying tradition, the primary source of his or her authority?

Given the concerns outlined above as well as those expressed by Bellone and Goerl themselves, we should abandon the misconceived quest to reconcile public entrepreneurship with democracy. The concept is dangerous and thus, public administration scholars should avoid using it if at all possible. I am afraid public entrepreneurship creates more problems than it solves. James Stever (1988) was right on target when he stated:

The entrepreneurial model may for some civil servants combat anomie and provide meaning for individual action but it can never legitimate public sector administration in the eye of a skeptical public. The public may envy, even admire the entrepreneur, but the actions of the entrepreneur are illegitimate in that the entrepreneur cannot be expected to function as guardian of the broader public interest (p. 99).

I conclude that despite Bellone and Goerl's well-intended efforts, the concept of civic-regarding entrepreneurship seems to be a wolf in sheep's clothing. The public administration community would do well to see it for what it is.



Larry D. Terry is an associate professor of public administration at Cleveland State University. He received his Ph.D. in public administration from the Center for Public Administration and Policy, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. His research interests include the role of bureaucratic leaders in governance; German administrative theory (especially the works of Lorenz Von Stein); and statutory interpretation from the perspective of public administrators. Terry is completing revisions on a book titled, *The Administrator as Conservator: The Leadership of Public Bureaucracies*.

Notes

1. For an excellent summary and discussion of the bureaucracy/democracy debate, see Burke, 1986), especially chap. 1, "Squaring the Circle: Making Bureaucracy Acceptable," and Cook 1992, pp. 403-429.
2. Also see the special issue of *Public Administration Review*, vol. 44 (1984) devoted to citizenship.

3. The term "misplaced" as used here is consistent with Ramos' (1981) notion of the misplacement of concepts. According to Ramos, the "misplacement of concepts takes place when the extension of a theory, model or concept of phenomenon of A to phenomenon B does not hold up after a thorough examination because phenomenon B belongs to peculiar context whose specific characteristics correspond only in limited ways to the context of phenomenon A" (p. 63).
4. For an interesting discussion of the concept "entrepreneurship" and its origin, see Peter Drucker (1985).
5. Bellone and Goerl are not alone. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler (1992) have also embraced this strategy and are subject to many of the same criticisms. For an excellent review and critique of Osborne and Gaebler's work, see Goodsell (1993).
6. Many of the problems identified here were first discussed in Terry (1990, pp. 395-412). Also see Terry (1991, pp. 186-183).
7. For discussion of the importance of defending and organization's integrity, see Philip Selznick (1984).

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