

# FROM AUSTERITY TO ABUNDANCE?

# CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC SECTOR MANAGEMENT

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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC  
SECTOR MANAGEMENT VOLUME 6

**FROM AUSTERITY TO  
ABUNDANCE? CREATIVE  
APPROACHES TO  
COORDINATING THE  
COMMON GOOD**

EDITED BY

**MARGARET STOUT**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# FOREWORD: TOWARD A POLITICS OF BELONGING

There are two obstacles to an adequate understanding of the multiple challenges the world faces at the beginning of the twenty-first century. (I'm speaking of "the world" and not humankind, to include the totality of society, democracy, and the natural environment in our current predicament.) The first is a crisis of imagination, the second a crisis of collective action.

For many of us, the perfect storm of problems that threaten our very existence as a viable democratic society embedded within a natural environment is hard to grasp. These threats defy our cognitive and moral capacities because of their systemic, dynamic, interconnected nature (Ison, 2010). The rapidly deteriorating parameters of a resilient natural and climatological environment; the frightening instances of unusual and extreme weather patterns; the large movements of refugees, escaping war and drought zones, toward the affluent societies in temperate climate zones; the worldwide rise of political authoritarianism and the concomitant erosion of democracy; the increasing inequality in wealth; the epidemic of loneliness and alienation that by now afflicts all generations (Monbiot, 2017, p. 16); the ever-increasing intrusion of corporations and governments into our private lives; the global "corpocracy" of giant transnational firms (Crouch, 2011); and the implication of national governments in many of these developments — all hang together in unpredictable ways.

The language in which we try to describe these issues is rooted in the very categories and practices that have created the problems in the first place. In everyday political discourse, concepts such as "markets," "freedom," "democracy," "the people," and "truth" have become part of the problem not the solution. They hold us captive by drawing virtual but all too real boundaries around ways of thinking that are considered acceptable and authoritative, in the process effacing important alternative ways of seeing, talking, and acting from view. When, in the more affluent societies, things seem to proceed pretty much as normal for most people, there is really no reason for concern, let alone collective action. The unintended result is that a crisis of imagination morphs into a breakdown of decency and empathy (Margalit, 1996) — a moral crisis, in other words.

The second obstacle is a crisis of collective action. The late Tony Judt (2010) observed that by now, two generations have grown up who do not have any experience, thus no expectations, of the benevolent powers of the state. Somewhere in the middle of the 1970s, the capacity and willingness of national

governments to distribute wealth fairly, create a solidarity-based, universalist system of risk containment, and open up access to affordable quality education for all, began to wane. In its place came an arid discourse of individual responsibility, small government, austerity, and the corporate takeover of public service. Within the space of two decades, the Social and Christian-Democratic ideal of human and cultural flourishing transformed into an “everyday neoliberalism” that pervaded the innermost recesses of our personal dispositions and subjected our collective and democratic institutions to rampant financialization (Brown, 2015; Mirowski, 2014). With this change in the master ideology of our age, governments simply dispensed with much of their capacity for collective problem-solving, retreating into an obsession with security and financial solvency. It is no wonder that in the process they also lost much of their political legitimacy, opening the door to political extremism into the heart of government. This state of affairs leads Margaret Stout to declare in the “Introduction” that the time of incremental policy-making is over. As she states: “Moving from a period of flush government coffers and public – private partnerships in the 1990s into one of austerity and load shedding – both of which are often driven by market interests and their effects – has demanded revolutionary or at least evolutionary thought in public management and administration.”

This edited volume demonstrates that there is a positive alternative, both in imaginative thought and collective action. Love and Stout’s chapter, “Are Social Movements Prefiguring Integrative Governance,” is a preview – a trailer if you please – of their upcoming book, *Integrative Governance: Generating Sustainable Responses to Global Crises*, wherein Stout and Love present a public philosophy for an alternative form of collective action that respects nature, fosters inclusiveness and solidarity (Prainsack & Buyx, 2017), and suggests a positive alternative to an economic and administrative system that is based on the appropriation and extractive exploitation of the commons (Bollier, 2002). This is a tall order because, as I argued earlier, the authors are up against an all-embracing hegemonic bloc. Their first task is to disentangle themselves from the language of extraction and the illusion of centralized control and to literally create a different vocabulary. For this, they turn toward the relational philosophy of Mary Parker Follett. Theirs is a world not of fixed objects and entities but an open world of process and becoming (see also Connolly, 2011). We inhabit this world not as individuals in the spirit of entrepreneurship, but as “stewards” of an intricate assemblage of materiality, social relations, institutions, experience, knowledge, and intention. Stout and Love (2019) use the term “co-creating” for these ongoing processes of attending to the commons, that is, co-creating in an awareness of the interconnectedness and emergent character of our social and material environment. Rightly, they refer to this pragmatist spirit as an ethic: “Stewardship is an ethic that combines the sense of *reverent interconnectivity* with a commitment to *emergent principles*. The inherent value of relatedness and reverence for interconnectedness demands mutual care, responsibility, and answerability for our actions” (emphases in original). In practical terms, this ethic becomes a plea for a radical, transformative form of democracy and an

integrative mode of governance in which citizens play a much larger role in collective problem-solving.

This edited volume builds on this formulation of an abstract relational public philosophy. It contains numerous empirical chapters that explore the varied nature of citizen involvement in governance co-production, the nature of collaboration in governance networks, the role of e/m-governance, and the transformative potential of action research, among other things. The value of the book is that it demonstrates that in these government–citizen collaborations and social movements, new ideas and practices that position themselves as alternatives to the hegemonic political-economic model of exploiting the commons are developed and tested. At the moment, these often local initiatives are far from being consolidated into a transformative movement. That is probably too much to ask at this point in time. Yet, the editor of and contributors to this book have taken upon themselves the hard work of locating and carefully researching, interpreting, and articulating the alternative ideas and practices that positively and effectively address the overwhelming challenges that humankind faces. In this work, they fulfill a tremendously valuable public service.

The next step needs to be one of transforming political rhetoric. We need visionary, charismatic thinkers who are able to formulate a new narrative that combines the different elements of the public philosophy that are developed in this and other works by Stout, Love, and like-minded scholars. Such a narrative will help us to reclaim our communities, our workplaces, and our sense of belonging, restoring faith in our capacity for empathy and collaboration, and bringing back a vibrant, nourishing natural environment. George Monbiot, the great British public intellectual, calls such a narrative a “politics of belonging” (2017). This book takes an important step towards such a politics of abundance.

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