Contesting Narratives in Politics


Hugh Miller is one of the most original and provocative theorists in the field of public policy and administration. His new book, Governing Narratives: Symbolic Politics and Policy Change, seeks to change in significant ways how we think and talk about public policy. The book’s basic thesis and contribution to the field is that we need to think about public policy not so much in terms of the various policy actors or institutions who are engaged in it, but rather in terms of the language—that is, the words, sentences, and stories—used to influence policy outcomes, along with all of the symbols, images, and connotations that this language evokes. At a time when there is much discussion about the quality of public discourse, this book can help us understand how our ever-changing political language shapes the way we come to look at—and, often, act on—public policy issues.

Ideographs, Narratives, and Politics

In looking at the language of public policy, a central idea for Miller is what he terms an ideograph. An ideograph, for Miller, is something that is evoked within the mind, not just cognitively but also affectively and emotionally, when a particular word or a phrase is used in political discourse, a word or a phrase such as “acid rain, drug lord, flood of immigrants, partial birth abortions, no child left behind” (91). An ideograph is, to use Miller’s own words, “symbolic material that brings into view a constellation of images, emotions, values, understanding, connotations, and facts” (3). It is a collection of ideas, mental constructs, or signs that shape how we see the world. These ideographs acquire meaning and influence in public policy as they are incorporated into different policy narratives or storylines that are advanced in public policy discourse and then acted on. Miller notes here, for example, how in public discourse over drug policy, there is both a “criminal narrative” and a “disease narrative” offered and that these two narratives make very different uses of the “drug addict” ideograph. As he observes, whereas in “the criminal narrative the drug addict deserves punishment … in the disease narrative the drug addict needs health care” (49).

Viewed from Miller’s ideographic perspective, politics should be seen as a contest, not primarily between individuals or groups but between different ideographs and the narratives or storylines that make use of them—a contest to capture meaning within political discourse and thereby to provide some sort of perceived legitimacy in our minds for proposed policy actions. As Miller demonstrates in his detailed examination of political discourse in drug policy as well as environmental policy, politics here becomes an “attempt to displace one ideograph with another” (93), an ongoing contest to “advance one narrative or another, thus warranting public action” (2). As Miller argues, when we view politics in this fashion, we can see that

One is not merely arguing with these “same people” over some contentious matter: rather, one narrative is in contest with another narrative. By displacing the individual or some aggregations of individuals (group, population) as unit of analysis, symbolic units such as signs, ideographs, and narratives reorient attention to the struggle over meaning capture and the strategic arranging of ideographic images, values, arguments, and so on. (49)

More specifically, for Miller, politics should be seen as an ongoing struggle between habit and change, between those ideographs and narratives that have become entrenched and habitual in their use—or habitus, as he terms them, drawing in part on Pierre Bourdieu (1977)—and other ideographs and narratives that seek to displace them. As Miller sees it, the “aim of politics is to challenge status quo practices and institutions” or, alternatively, “from the status quo
perspective, to fend off potentially challenging narratives” (54). Looking at this in another way, politics can be seen here as a struggle between what Miller terms “readerly texts,” on the one hand, that are “fixed and static,” texts that “read themselves and perpetuate an established view of reality and values … frozen in time,” and “writery texts,” on the other hand, that “involve us in the dangerous and exhilarating activity of creating our world anew, together with the author, as we go along” and that “are open to the play of meanings” (52).

For Miller, politics emerges in what he describes as “moments of impasse,” moments when, at least from the perspective of some, the “status quo has become problematic” (68). These moments of impasse may occur, for example, when “the problems that old practices were designed to solve … have disappeared or changed” or when “instrumentally better ways and means are now available,” or “when old ways … have become emotionally untenable” (68). At such moments of impasse, there is a “potential for conflict, as sedimented practices and established narratives seek to reinforce or defend themselves” (69). There is, at this point, what Miller terms “political conflict in the symbolic environment” as “institutionalized ideography and practice are called into question, and history gets a chance to move” (70).

**The Limits of Rationality and Science**

A recurring theme in Miller’s book is that the aforementioned contest between competing ideographs and policy narratives places severe limits on the role that rationality and scientific analysis can play in public policy discourse. Indeed, as Miller argues, his book “can be read as an investigation of why science, logic, and rationality are not necessarily trump in public policy discourse” and why “policy narratives that are not necessarily rational have, time and again, been enacted into law and implemented—while rational solutions have frequently been blocked” (10). As he demonstrates, it can help us understand, for instance, in the case of drug policy, how the “war on drugs” has continued for decades, notwithstanding its demon- strated futility, in part because of its reliance on racial narratives, and also how, in the case of environmental policy, the whole environmental movement, despite support from scientists, was effectively slowed in the 1980s by a combination of antigovernment, states’ rights, and pro-growth narratives that found expression in the so-called Sagebrush Rebellion.

Seeking to put policy experts in their proper place, as this author sees it, Miller argues that within “a democratic policy discourse, the causal stories of researchers will not be the only narratives allowed into the sphere of influence. The criteria for policy change will not necessarily be grounded in sound research” and “advocacy groups may instead use values, emotions, reactions, hyperbole, and any number of additional strategies to induce policy change” (1). He observes, while “those engaged in public policy may … wish for a refuge from the systematic bias, advocacy, manipulation, and gaming that takes place in political environments,” given the competing ideographs and storylines that make up public policy discourse, “even seemingly objective findings are usually contestable for one methodological reason or another” (10).

In fact, from Miller’s perspective, the term “science” itself is simply just another ideograph, and any scientific analysis of public policy is just another narrative that must compete along with others in the political arena. Science can never operate “objectively,” somehow above the political fray, and appeals to so-called scientific facts can never be final because “none of us language users adopt a totally impartial, unbiased, objective view that is narrative free” and “different narratives generate different sets of relevant facts.” (7). Rather, as Miller puts the matter, “in policy discourse, science functions as a connotative ideograph, deployed rhetorically in policy tropes such as ‘science tells us’ or ‘we have the science on our side’” (10).

Moreover, as Miller sees it, once we focus our attention on ideographs and narratives, notions of human rationality, as well as the human self, become open to contest. As Miller argues, the “modern image of a rational, autonomous, intentional actor is cast into doubt in narrative analysis” and is “displaced by a decentered subject whose personage is inscribed by childhood experiences, family practices, educational background, and many other cultural influences” (xi). To put it bluntly, we are simply products or, perhaps more accurately, instruments of our historically accumulated and contesting ideographs and narratives. From Miller’s perspective, it is an illusion, therefore, to believe in the existence of a “unified intentional individual” who has “a place in the brain where there is no further internal dialogue, no contradictions between impulses and logic” and “where the internal boss presides” (14–15). He suggests that we think instead of the human “self” simply as a “sort of clearinghouse, or gatekeeper—a switchman rather than the boss” (15).

**Implications for Public Administration**

All of this, for Miller, has important implications for public administration, which, of course, has always had its own particular ideographs and narratives. Noting the continuing influence of one of the more important ideographs in our field, the politics-administration dichotomy, he argues that whereas “the conception of public administration practice as somehow neutral or objective seems to have lost all its adherents—yet a politics–administration dichotomy remains omnipresent, breathing just in the background, invisibly supplying shared assumptions and
predispositions that enable yet delimit numerous conversations” (ix). This dichotomy, in Miller’s view, is unrealistic because, in politics, as noted earlier, there is always an ongoing contest to capture meaning so that “public action, once it occurs” can never be “the end of political contestation” (2). Rather, public administration is inevitably political because “every aspect of public policy and administration is imbued with political potential” (2).

In Miller’s view, “politics does not end when the implementation stage commences” because the “techniques of public administration” are themselves “profoundly political” (63). He argues that the very “techniques, and tactics that are presupposed to constitute neutral expertise (or best practices)” within public administration “have a profoundly political role in stabilizing society, reinforcing the status quo, caring for the population, and controlling it” (65). As such, for Miller, in terms of their actual effects on our everyday lives, these techniques and tactics are anything but apolitical.

Not surprisingly, then, Miller worries here about the domination of managerial narratives in our thinking and practice. He is concerned lest an “overemphasis” on “managerial control” or “managerial discipline” within public administration prevent what he terms “creative experimentation with new associations,” thus “impeding adaptation to turbulent environments and diminishing the opportunities for creative solutions to complex problems” (92). He argues that “for a practicing public administrator it is equally valid to worry about too much institutionalized control (that might sniff out alternatives) as too little institutionalized stability and integration (that might lead to chaos and loss of efficacy)” (92–93).

The Nature of Politics and the Necessity of Habitus
Miller’s analysis of politics in terms of competing ideographs and narratives can be at times disorienting, but it is nonetheless invaluable in highlighting for us the important characteristics of politics. The most important of these is that politics at root is about conflict or contestation. No doubt, some readers might prefer that Miller had offered us a more hopeful or rational view of politics. Critical theorists, such as Jürgen Habermas, for instance, would have us believe that politics, at least ideally, is about a “cooperative search for truth” (Habermas 1998, 228). These theorists, who have not been without some influence within our field (see, e.g., Denhardt 1981) seek a more rational, a more authentic kind of political discourse, one in which the arguments offered are those “to which all possibly affected persons could assent as participants in rational discourses” (Habermas 1998, 459) and the winning arguments are “the better arguments based on the best information and reasons” (228). However, if Miller’s argument is accepted, then the latter view of policy discourse, whatever its merits, becomes just yet another narrative that must compete with others, most of which are far more visceral and emotive in their appeal, in the arena of politics. As Miller puts the matter succinctly, “competition among ideographs and narratives does not imply that the best narrative wins; only that the winning narrative has won for the time being” (81–82).

To steal a phrase from James Buchanan (1999), what Miller offers us here, to my mind, is a view of “politics without romance.” Miller’s critics might reply, of course, that his unromantic view of politics is itself a narrative, bringing with it its own particular set of ideographs, including the term “ideograph” itself. Miller, for his part, I suspect, would readily assent to this point, but he would argue nonetheless that his is a more persuasive narrative than that offered by others. From my perspective, it is a more persuasive narrative because it encourages an acceptance, and perhaps at times even a celebration, of “the perpetuity of contest” that is characteristic of politics (Honig 1993, 14). Miller appears to encourage such an acceptance, for example, when he writes sympathetically of the idea of an “ideographic democracy,” one that “would consist of symbolic associations that are not fixed permanently but are open to reinterpretation and choice” (52). In such an ideographic democracy, “new attempts at meaning making are permitted, and blasphe mies and heresies are treated as competing views at times even a celebration, of “the perpetuity of contest” that is characteristic of politics (Honig 1993, 14). Miller appears to encourage such an acceptance, for example, when he writes sympathetically of the idea of an “ideographic democracy,” one that “would consist of symbolic associations that are not fixed permanently but are open to reinterpretation and choice” (52). In such an ideographic democracy, “new attempts at meaning making are permitted, and blasphemies and heresies are treated as competing views rather than punishable offenses” (52). Later in the book, he writes similarly of a “discursive democracy,” where, as he sees it, “there is freedom to make new associations and connotations, to experiment with and legitimate new actions and social practices” and where “upstart heretical narratives are allowed to compete against a dominant status quo narrative” (93). The bottom line, then, for Miller, it seems, is that contestability is a good thing.

An important point, however, that Miller does not mention here is that the practice of a politics of competing ideographs and narratives itself needs a certain kind of habitus with its own somewhat entrenched narratives and ideographs. While politics is a contest between change and the status quo, it still requires, to use another term for habitus, its own “culture of regularity and mutual expectation—where acquired responses, dispositions, practices, and behaviors come to seem like second nature” (71). After all, the question can be raised as to why it is that we frequently, at least in modern democratic states, seek to manage the conflicts that arise among us by use of politics or competing ideographs and narratives rather than simply the use of force and violence. In other words, why do we so often choose to talk rather than fight? To answer this question in a manner that is consistent with Miller’s approach, one would say that there must
exist within our communities certain habits or customary practices that, while they certainly do not compel, at least encourage the managing of conflict in this fashion. Among the most important of these, in my view, are our habits and practices of adversarial argument or hearing the other side. It is these habits and practices that induce us more often than not to settle our differences by engaging in political contests of narratives and ideographs rather than automatically resorting to the use of force and violence (Hampshire 2001).

This raises the question as to what kind of habitus is needed to foster the type of process of ongoing argument and contestation that Miller and others including this author see as desirable. A proper answer to this question lies beyond the scope of this particular essay, but my own view is that, at least within the American context, our constitutional habits and practices are helpful in fostering such contestation (Spicer 2010). This is because although these habits and practices provide a structure and a narrative for the performance of governance, that structure and narrative are, at the same time, open to contestation and can change over time both through formal amendment as well judicial and political interpretation. Miller seems to recognize this when he notes that the “U.S. Constitution is both readerly … and writerly” (52). Of course, others may have a quite different view of our constitutional system of governance, but the point made here is simply that certain kinds of habitus are conducive to the use of argument and contestation as a means of settling our differences whereas other kinds of habitus are not, as evidenced by failed states, bloody civil wars, and brutal dictatorships all around the globe. How well the human species fares in the future may well depend on how well it is able to promote and protect the former kind of habitus rather than the latter kind of habitus. As Miller’s insightful analysis of political narratives makes clear for us, the ideographs and narratives that we use are not simply words. They constitute who we are, and they can have consequences for us, both good and bad.

References


