Book Review

Fabricating the People: Politics and Administration in the Biopolitical State
Thomas J. Catlaw[1]
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Distrust in government is widespread. In 1995, 75 percent of people reported that they distrust the federal government.[2] This level of distrust has been gradually increasing over the past several decades; in 1964, 75 percent of people reported trusting the federal government. (Nye et al. 1997) What is causing citizens to lose faith in government? Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2001) suggest that while individuals are not necessarily looking for a pure democracy, they fear that the current governmental processes have become too dominated by public officials. Similarly, the field of public administration has found itself embroiled in its own corollary debate regarding its legitimacy, particularly the level of accountability to "the People."

In his book, *Fabricating the People*, Thomas Catlaw (2007) takes a fresh approach at trying to understand this "rising tide of hostility toward government" (1) and leads the reader to look beyond the usual accountability arguments to consider the very nature of "the People" itself. In essence, he questions whether it makes sense to act as if a single sovereign entity called "the People" actually exists. Catlaw roots this question about the ontology (i.e., the inherent nature) of "the People" in the long-standing debate about the legitimacy of public administration. At the heart of this debate lies the apparent conflict between the autonomous actions of individual bureaucrats and the public will of citizens, as determined through demo-

cratic representation. Because the public does not elect individual public administrators, there is concern that public administrators will therefore be unresponsive to, and unrepresentative of, the public will. This concern runs deeply throughout public administration's history and has been the source of much consternation in the field.

According to Catlaw, the existence of a sovereign entity called "the People" should not be taken for granted. Catlaw begins his book with the alarming claim that "The very fabric of the world is coming undone" (2). While this may seem like a radical statement, the heart of the argument is really quite straightforward. For Catlaw, the presumptive sovereignty of "the People" is rooted in a fantasy; put simply, "the People," as a unified entity, does not exist. Thus, Catlaw is not attempting to find a particular form of government that accurately mirrors the will of "the People"; rather, he is challenging the philosophical assumptions that are taken for granted when we accept "the People" as something that exists prior to the representational effort (Harmon 2006).

At its core, Catlaw puts forward a structuralist argument. Structuralism presents the idea that there is never a one-to-one relationship between an object (what is being signified) and the word, or words, associated with it (the signifiers). Language is always somewhat arbitrary and the language we use shapes our understanding of the world rather than vice versa. A gap necessarily exists between the word and the object because they refer to different things (Catlaw 2007). In this case, "the People" and what it is meant to signify cannot have a strict real-world correspondence.

It is easy to overlook this lack of strict correspondence, however, because we have a tendency to use cognitive shorthand that treats social ideas and institutions as real (they become reified). Due to the reification of representation, there is an attempt to create a "relationship of model and copy" (62) in which "government is to be the rational reconstruction of the object, the People" (68). By ignoring the problem inherent in the relationship between the sign (government) and the signified ("the People"), Catlaw argues that the ontology of representation uses sovereignty to deny the existence of this gap and, more importantly, to create the illusion that there

is something in the world called "the People" that exists prior to the act of representation. Unfortunately, Catlaw tells us, "representation's models always leak" (72).

Perhaps more insidious, however, is not the leaky model, but the assumption it hides: that there is a strict correspondence between government and "the People." This assumption lends a misleading sense of objectivity to the act of representation, according to Catlaw. If we think back to the opening discussion about legitimacy in public administration, one can see how such assumptions fuel the politics-administration dichotomy and the corresponding legitimacy debate.

Additionally, the project of creating, or fabricating, "the People" requires the transformation of a multitude of individual and differing viewpoints into a single homogenous unity: "a people" (Catlaw 2007; Hardt and Negri 2000). In order to justify governmental action, the Sovereign ("the People") must have a singular source of identity, and this cannot happen if individuality and difference are fully recognized. Catlaw sums this up quite succinctly when he states, "Paradoxically, it is representation's very commitment to unity that produces its most violent and exclusionary effect" (190). In order to create the unified entity of "the People," it is necessary to establish boundaries to delimit the contents of this entity.

Catlaw's claim that the "fabric of the world is coming undone" suggests that increasing and diverse groups and points of view make it ever more difficult to maintain the idea of a single unified sovereign called "the People." This process of internalizing differences began in the Progressive Era as those ideas that had been traditionally excluded were brought "inside" (140).[3] Catlaw claims that public administration arose as a tool to make this internalized exclusion "less unruly" through discipline, leading to the focus on efficiency as a way to normalize and homogenize (again bringing us back to the politics-administration dichotomy). However, he tells us, these attempts at stability "will always be temporary and always be breaking down" (147).

This inevitable "breaking down" has helped lead to the anti-governmentalist sentiment that has become increasingly prevalent. In response,

Catlaw asserts that there has been a recent shift from the goal of normalization (the effort to create a stabilized and homogenous "People") to one of control, and that this shift has made the idea of "the People" vulnerable (179). In this system of control, government failure serves epistemologically ulterior ends: creating deep-rooted conflict throughout society and the promotion of science and law as tools to maintain unification, safety, and happiness (164-65).[4]

Catlaw sees this recent shift as rendering traditional arguments in public administration irrelevant (180). Instead, he suggests a move away from the political ontology of "the People" to what he calls the "politics of the subject." The "politics of the subject" makes six basic propositions, asking us to: (1) commit ourselves to regional ontologies, rather than attempting to create one universal ontology; (2) recognize infinite differences, a return to a multitude rather than attempting a homogenous unity; (3) acknowledge the primacy of each unique situation, rather than generating universal models; (4) develop governance that incorporates all human experience, rather than limiting governing to public institutions; (5) remove the emphasis from expertise to a collaboration that conceives of all citizens as practitioners; and, (6) ensure that "governing must be good for those who have been reduced to nothing" (193-198).

Although he decries public administration as "dead," Catlaw really sees public administration as the perfect place from which to pursue the politics of the subject by refusing "the matrix of conventional politics and the timidity conditioned by its intellectual heritage and legitimacy problem" (203). Thus, Catlaw's project is not anti-democratic; instead it aims to initiate a move towards an ontology that allows for "self-governing or self-conducting of conduct" (15) by moving towards a governance of collaboration rather than control.

After carefully dissecting and analyzing the argument that Catlaw puts forth, two responses seem inevitable. First, the innovation of the argument and its inevitable importance to our understanding of self-governance are exceedingly important to the future of governance. The second, more difficult response is: Now what? The answer to this question is not straight-

forward. Once we recognize the problems inherent in the way we conceive of our current political ontology, the next step is not immediately obvious. What is apparent, however, is that our current footing is not as secure as we would like to believe.

References

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Notes

1. Dr. Catlaw is an alumnus of The George Washington University and this book began as his dissertation. He earned a Master of Public Administration, with a concentration in Social Theory, at GWU in 2000 and a PhD in Public Administration at GWU in 2003. During his studies, Dr. Catlaw served as Editor-In-Chief and Article Editor for *Policy Perspectives*. Dr. Catlaw is currently an Assistant Professor in the School of Public Affairs at Arizona State University and serves as Editor-In-Chief for the journal *Administrative Theory and Praxis*.

2. This distrust is only slightly less pronounced at more local levels of government. The same study indicated that 35 percent of people surveyed trusted their state governments. A similar survey in 1997 showed even lower levels of trust for all three levels of government: federal (15 percent); state (23 percent); and local (31 percent) (Nye et al. 1997).

3. Catlaw (2007) breaks these groups into three forms of exclusion under the Law: the Written-Out; the Kept-Out; and the Included-Out (111-12).

4. If we take a moment to consider the "War on Terrorism" and its companion "Culture of Fear," these claims begin to sound slightly less conspiratorial.

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