Idle thoughts on method, agony, and pretense

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Abstract - Introduction

This paper contains a reflection triggered by the assumption that a de-centered public administration is the kind of PA that we do today. In such a world, the concrete concedes to the fluid, formerly material things to their pure attributes. Men and women no longer belong, nor count and consecrate their deeds and days accordingly, to the metals that used to constitute us: stone, iron, bronze. Virtual space has desecrated human place, as much as digital time the consecrated succession of tenses and ages. The fascination with instants and other illusionary instruments of time seem to dominate today’s still bureaucratic ordering of life and miseries. If these misfortunes were true, this resigned reflection (fragmented images, shadows, the lowest level of opinion, according to Plato) is about my inability to turn its movements it into a scholarly argument, while accepting the importance of a “coherent theoretical re-description”. As an alternative, this paper is about my personal experience with determinations of knowledgeable practices and uncertainties that sustain agency and legitimate pretenses, or conversations, in the public domain.

Method will be treated as being-in-motion, moving on, consciously out of grace (Gadamer), dedicated not to seek or speak the truth although its silence may be regretted. It will also mean not to anticipate destinations, despite the firm belief that purposeful conversations happen literally in the open, in movement. Agony is referred to the methodic impossibility of reconciling the theorist’s sense of innocence lost (Harmon) with the inscrutable fate of the practitioner’s “quehacer”. Consequently, methodical agony may be understood as a tragic, non-redemptory faith in the capacity of dedicated wanderers, or skeptics, like my most admired friends and colleagues in the net, to produce answers while rethinking and reformulating the questions that motivate them.
Method

From the Greek *methodos*, or *meta-*-, in-between, plus *hodos*, way, meaning systematic procedure, technique, or mode of inquiry of a particular discipline or art. It implies an orderly logical arrangement, and also the attainment of a plan.³

My friend Claudio Campagna is a methodical person.⁴ He is a biologist that works with other researchers and interested people—among whom I would like to count myself—to protect and preserve the marine biodiversity of the Patagonian Sea. They are basically scientists and, if there is beauty in ideas of noble purpose “and in the organizations and processes we build to achieve those ideas” (Frederickson, 2000, p. 47), they are artists. Claudio works most specially with marine elephants. I do not know how he does that. Marine elephants, the scientists/artists that study and admire them and any other organizational theorist, belong to the species of mammals, warm-blooded creatures that nourish their young ones with milk secreted by their own *mammas*. That is, creatures whose sociability and language—if any, as in humans—is founded on the emotion called love. Mammals belong to a self-producing, self-recognizing lineage. Fallen in the world, disgraced by knowledge, condemned to method.

Goodman argued that the Garden of Eden was lost “not for lust but for curiosity, not for sex but for science” (1984, p.2). The idea associates knowledge with sin, which is to say, with consequence. Maturana (1996) and others helped us believe that we know in the interpretive coherence of our experiences, in the dynamic structuration of knowing, in its somehow emotional (in-motion) occurrence. Movements/moments of feeling preceded those of thinking, in the species and in each of us; Goodman’s choice of metaphor only conjectures how method became consequential. Historic reparation of a remote misdeed, or warrant against its perdurable shadow, method became thinkable practice, rational shield justified by the preeminence of truth and universality over particularisms. In its intimacy, method reasserts confidence and security. However, despite the methodical constitution of my friends’ relationship with marine elephants and life as a whole, there is musicality, sense and meaning, not just penance, in the irreducible unity of admiration, discovery, dedication, and enjoyment that their work at the Sea and Sky Project produce. To all practical ends, these methodical people act as if they were, if not guilty, more responsible than seals, elephants and other marine creatures for the common and reciprocal fate. A true passion frees their methodic inquiry and the knowledge thus produced from the frustrations of bounded rationality.

Being-in-method is natural to beings in motion. Marine mammals know it, and it suffices for them to be methodic. Music is methodic, yet in a way that transcends method, as it can be said of chess, navigation and other divinatory arts and practices. Methodically inquiring exposes us to displacement, movement, unfamiliar callings, anti-lovely scenes and the persistency of searches that risk never reaching a secure end. Antonio Machado truly meant it when he said—in celebrated Spanish verses—that walkers have no road other than those that walkers make by moving on.⁵

Bureaucrats, like any other predators of talent foreign to them, know little about methods of inquiry and wandering. They live in fixed terrestrial residences and act as methodologizing methodologists: they colonize by projects, by means already established, with words void of
history and surprises. Prose, and not poetry, is their natural language, and predetermination—preferably emptied of time and paradox—their aim. Unlike them, non-bureaucratic methodic beings are time-conscious creatures that enjoy following seemingly original paths. “One believes that lives surrounded by truths, but we really live surrounded by interpreted events, fragmented information, biases, expectations. In knowledge, security is not the rule” (Campagna, 2002, p. 13).

Marine elephants dwell along predictable sea rivers in the depth of the sea, and feed at their borders. From time to time, these mammals may repeat, or not, their wanderings, ignoring Heraclitus admonition about the improbable river and the hopeless man. In solving problems, if any, marine elephants are unlikely to appeal to the rigor of metals, stones, and that ultimate rejection of seeking/justice named obedience. Their thinking as playing (all in David Farmer’s terms) occurs when their quest pushes to its physical limits. “As a scientist”—Claudio wrote—“I live in the border between my wishful understanding of the world, subdued to timely limits, and the ways that science allows me” (2002, p.12).

Scientists/artists like Claudio and his colleagues define their inquiry mostly as relations between things and facts that they value, and representations of valuable things and facts, past, present and future. Their own thinking as playing makes them observe, count, measure, compare, discard, and fill up countless notebooks with numbers and symbols of unequivocal meaning. The game goes on as they attach harmless remote sensors to big marine animals, follow their oceanic roundabouts through satellite technology, draw maps with colored pencils, make picturesque tri-dimensional schemes of the forms and shadows at the bottom of the deep blue sea. And then, somehow, from all that work plus something more, they conceive and advance ingenious as well as sophisticated solutions to complex problems. As already said, they are methodic people, whose claims do not ignore that methods are intricate timely paths, from time to time plagued by errors, deceptions, crimes not rarely unpunished and severe suspicions of betrayal. They know that solutions, like problems, exist only if defined as such by someone with capacity to declare and act accordingly. They are aware of the necessary mediations, that is, agencies, correspondences, translations that defining and solving problems imply. Yet playing, like musicking, occurs in a time of its own.

Scientists and artists like Claudio and the team I met in Patagonia can make fun of themselves as they grow serious and in trouble with the paradox of method called translation and the necessity for agreements to be expressed in unequivocal languages. The limits of their domain are marked by realistic theories along formal requirements, yet they benefit from moving within rational limits, subjected to time and motions, to approach imaginatively and responsibly a mysterious territory and legacy. Like any other marine or terrestrial mammals, they have to endure harsh conditions and unfriendly partners: very cold and windy weather (or rainy, or dry, or unpredictable), temperamental males in the herd and in office, recurrent shortages of funds, food and benevolence, indolent bureaucrats, shrewd predators, mistrustful politicians, unapprehensive fishermen. Against indifference and ignorance, my good friends’ ethical and aesthetical purposes stands—as the ancient Greeks who saw and loved the sea for the first time knew—as their residence and practice; with their characteristic acts they establish the knowledge that they inhabit.
Agony

From Middle English agonie, from Late Latin agonia, from Greek agonia, struggle, anguish, from agOn, gathering, contest for a prize, from agein, to lead, celebrate. See also agent. 1: intense pain of mind or body; the struggle that precedes death. 2: a violent struggle or contest. 3: a strong sudden display (as of joy or delight).

At the beginning of James Joyce’s Ulysses, Buck Mulligan commands young Dedalus to think of the Greeks and the way they revered the sea, in their own language: “Thalatta! Thalatta!” —he cries out—“She is our great sweet mother. Come and look”. The Ulysses has been discussed as a journey, a quest, duration, metaphor, and controversy. Etymology, however, is the luminous archeology for voices to restore their origin and reinstate their identity by its own virtue. While traveling from Buenos Aires to Puerto Madryn, I thought that my participation in an environmental project was vaguely justified by means of being someone who knows something about organizing in the public domain. Once close to location, I found myself thinking about the remote question and presumption, and leaving it unanswered: What do I do when I look at the motherly sea?

Maybe it’s more than one question, or variations on the many questions about doings and doings not, and the right to do and to do not. Maybe it’s about willingness, obligations, options, conveniences, and consequences. Or navigation, computing, and competence. It should be about irony, self-reference, futility. Or all is in the hours and the uneasiness of hours that my friends spent by the sea, purposely working. Images: the solitary cold piercing the bones; the many fragments and remains of lives past scattered across the fields, unnoticed; the anonymous footprints on a most southern dune, that made the dune a work of art; the stubborn silence of the Patagonian immensity. I didn’t have an answer, nor did I look for one, for my own being there, candidly, relating to biologists and to marine subjects about which I know nothing.

“‘What is the use of marine elephants, after all?’ is the kind of question a sensible person should not make” –Claudio would have said, if asked. He might have been right: no sensible person has terminated answers regarding marine elephants or any other creature, concept, process or system. That is not a principled limitation to personal responsibility or moral obligation (Harmon, 1995) as expression of agency, or its agony. David Farmer says that it’s the seeking that is primary (2006, p. 308), and I honestly agree. Others protest against self-indulgence, and I also sympathize with them. No objection should be made to those who refuse to accept remedies against any unsatisfactory science or the methodic disability that make us turn our minds and hearts to art and other means transcendental to frustrations and rejections associated to altruism during sad times.

Claudio Campagna confessed that, early in his career, he was shocked by observing adult marine elephants perpetrate selfish and brutal acts against young ones, unjustified in terms of what might have been termed “survival of the species”. Why should every act, no matter how deplorable, be ultimately justified as contribution to the collective benefit of the perpetrator’s species or, at least, explained within its secluded limits? What does it “truly” mean to realize that there are no foundations other than those recognizable through identification with people, territories and legacies we love, while realizing at the same time that that love “truly” founds? If hope and certitude, like grace and genius, are not methodic,
satiety with cruelty and political nightmares needs not to be methodic either. Scientists do not trust definitive answers, artists deplore their happening, and marine elephants never told us what do they think or not-think about them. It is acceptable, from time to time, to feel not in the mood for love and play. It is not unreasonable, yet, to persist in the strong belief that the ultimate way to contradict cruelty is by not making it. Agony, after all, is the methodic impossibility of reconciling our sense of innocence lost (Harmon, 1995) –lost, like the only paradise possible (Borges, 1985)—with the inscrutable fate of our practical “quehacer”.

In our quehacer there is our daemon, as Heraclitus said. This means not a fatality nor an irrevocable destiny, not duty nor its essence, but a persistent and worked on idiosyncrasy, that manifests itself in each person’s realizations, and makes his ethic her home and habit.

In a way, the paradox of nomadism, or skepticism, lies precisely in the distressing search and its simultaneous excitement, in the misfortune of inexhaustible choices and the tolerance that wisdom or its promise brings along with its exploration. Our quehacer is our agency, our gathering and pain, our struggle and celebration. My friends’ quehacer as PA theorists and practitioners is not made by preconceived answers or obligations but of certain curiosities, doubts, disenchantments, persuasions, affiliations, repentances, loves, silences and dreamt on methodic possibilities and anti-possibilities as well.

Claudio and his colleagues made a great effort to instruct me about their work and the marine creatures, the oceanic forces, the fisheries, the international law, the problems with power and national sovereignty and a few other critical matters whose specific contents and connections, with great disappointment, I promptly confused or forgot. Explanations are narratives and narratives of narratives, movements from one argument to another and the next. Translations, in a literal sense: movements/moments of experience within its limits, which is to say worlds and languages. The unity of acting, knowing and valuing operates through the metaphorical structuring of experiences, that is, by moving-on and translating. In this sense, they are inescapable forms of agency and consequence in which we may find ourselves as protagonist or antagonist –Unamuno anticipated this notion—but always as agonists. Unsure, comforted, I stayed with my friends, working all day, and the following day too.

Pretense or pretence

From Middle French pretensse, from (assumed) Medieval Latin praetensa, from Late Latin, feminine of praetensus. 1: a claim made or implied, especially one not supported by fact; 2: mere ostentation; confuse dignity with pomposity and pretense; 3: an inadequate or insincere attempt to attain a certain condition or quality; 4: professed rather than real intention or purpose; 5: pretext, fiction, simulation.

Working with my friends in Patagonia made me think of Darcy Ribeiro saying, shortly before his death: “I failed in everything that I have tried in my life. I tried to educate the children, and I failed; to save the natives, and I failed; to create a sound university, and I failed… Yet my failures are my victories: I would really hate to find myself in the place of those who defeated me”. The feeling is well known for those of us who have in high esteem intentional and constructive approaches to public affairs, as opposed to those others based on the methodic acceptance of allegedly irresponsible obedience of bureaucratic
endeavors. Persuaded, as most of us are, of the superiority of our claims, frustration often transports this feeling to the heights of celebration of failure, as genuine moral vindication. But there is no cause in celebrating failure, except for discriminating ostentation and vanity from legitimate pretenses.

Long before anyone had speculated about agency and social processes, Pythagoreans dreamt the audible number and the form of the sphere that caused and ordered the universe. Since their failure, yet seemingly unrelated to it, all arts—Borges sentenced—aspire to the condition of music. Failure belongs to the world (or sphere) of ideas, strategies, projects, politics. Failure affects consequences in public business or any other subject of inquiry, but not our sociability and knowledge themselves. It affects what we know and value about celestial bodies, networks of governance, the migratory culture (practice) of mammals, humans included, and any other systemic subject under scrutiny. Despite all this, failure never reaches the emotions that specified the acting that led to an unfortunate representation or performance. Failures become problematic once controversies about methods to solve them take the lead; they don’t cancel any pretense. Should I resign my heart and promises, made and received, to failure? Or I’d better take failure for granted, as an injustice more than a mistake, when assuming that PA theorizing could aspire to the condition of music?

Being-in-motion happens to pretenses too. They change along with our own irreversible movements/moments, in front of us, in the mirror of our own pretenses. Claudio Campagna said that, at first, he studied marine elephants’ life as a natural model for the study of social processes; some time later, he looked at them as basis for genetic modeling, and afterwards, as a model for underwater searching behavior and oceanic distribution. “Today”—he says—“they are a link with place and expectation… my justification to come back to the seashores of Valdes Peninsula... in search of that profound way that no longer resigns itself to data and craves for concept” (Campagna, 2002, p.18).

The problem of perdurability of intentions and claims belongs to a theory of time. Practicing public administration as art, for instance, should not leave room for non-temporal pretenses, or callings for a purely spatial, unfounded geometry for public practices to take place somewhere on or around them. Timeless theories or theories with no interpretive limits have no place at all. On the other hand, moving from one term of experience to another term of experience—as in translation—is vital for the comprehension and seeking of a better life. It is also an inevitable agony. As I write, translation, its forms and ambiguities impose over me, methodically. In some way, it says about the inscrutable fate of theorists/practitioners who agonize their doings and doings-not publicly, aware that the territorial and temporal limits of their field of action, and their own capacity, may remain unexplored, aware of the non-methodic temptation of being loyal, if not to truth, to the beauty and goodness of their searching, grounded on rich and solid experience, simultaneously bearing the tension of its denial.

I am doomed to think, act and value within the inexact character of the public domain with no better basis than its own occurrence. Paradoxical pretenses trap me between true claims and legitimate voices, and the threatening arrogance of those in positions of power. Michael Harmon warns us about illusionary, or falsifiable, sense of innocence lost; David Farmer encourages us to assume the practice of public administration as a form of art. Musicians of different persuasions know (because they do it) that artists can only perform within a certain state of innocence, which is to say, a state of no pretense (Jankélévitch, 2005, p.138). So,
since we have pretenses, no matter how modest or inconsequential, we have to live with the apparent paradox.

Could this tension turn a repented essentialist into an indolent anarchist? I cannot say either whether looking at the sea could facilitate any answer or simply more elaborated questions. Nonetheless, I will accept the invitation to look at sea. In the progression of conversations, answers reformulate the question, anyway. This is the almost obliged standing for members of a non-redemptive congregation, aware that the “essential difference” between rationalist and paradoxical approaches to PA practice lies on “the proper relation between innocence and redemption” (Harmon, 1995, p.70).

I like to imagine that this condition was common knowledge for the magicians who first abandoned the private practice of their art in benefit of entire tribes (Fraser, 2003), thus producing the etymological, non-pretentious yet responsible passage from idiocy to public policy. I like to imagine that not only magic but religion, arts, science and other conversations have also important things to say to those who choose to remain idiots, whether in office or the open seas. Otherwise, it would be hard to reinstate hope and a certain enchantment with the “public sphere”, quite necessary to live it as our place and legitimate commitments. Once we are in an intentional, paradoxical, not rationalist approach to public organizing, the divide between pretense and ostentation is a thin, intense, fragile and movable borderline.

Afterthought

My friends are pretentious people. The Little Prince couldn’t help cheating/changing his self-produced horizon in its own little planet, but enjoyed forty three sunsets by simply moving his chair repeatedly and purposefully. There’s something sacred in practices of noble purpose, whether ephemeral or perdurable. I will look at the sea. Maybe someone, if not me, will wish to recover, even undeservedly or by cheating the circumstances, a certain state of innocence, and celebrate, even immodestly, the work of my friends and colleagues, here and there, in the public domain. Especially when we miss the thin line and fail to produce expected answers in the agony of rethinking and reformulating the questions that motivate them.

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References


NOTES

1 In Spanish, quehacer (lit. what-to-do) means idiosyncratic duty, dedication and personal sense of obligation. Here is used to echo Heraclitus idea of daemon, by means of which each person is doomed to realize its own.

2 Kant defined skeptics as kind of nomads that hate every work that may look solid on the ground. Most of the skeptics that I am saluting here inhabit PAT-Net.

3 Definitions taken from the Merriam Webster Online Dictionary.

4 Claudio Campagna is Director of the Sea and Sky Project, a program for the conservation of the Patagonian Seascape, a joint initiative of the Wildlife Conservation Society, USA, and the National Council for Scientific Research and Technology (CONICET), Argentina. Please, visit http://www.modelo-mar.org/

5 Antonio Machado (Spanish poet, 1875-1939). See his poem “Caminante” (“Walker”).

6 The degradation of Pluto is an example. The last Assembly of the International Astronomical Union (Prague, 2006) reassigned Pluto to the condition of minor member of the Solar System, as a “dwarf planet”. The decision is not final, the news added.

7 In the way Arthur Rubinstein once declared that, from time to time, he felt tired with piano concerts, trips, rehearsals, interviews and other forms of fatigue, and even then, there was still Mozart beyond his tiredness.

8 Etymology, again, facilitates these intersections, or forms of sympathy among different yet proximate words, like characteristic or ethic (ήθιχός), habit (έθος), and home, residence (ήθος).

9 Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936). Spanish writer, philosopher, and educator. His works explored the tension between thought and faith, and the alleged tragedy of reason for offering no consolation to human’s frailty. Well known for developing the perspective of the “tragic sentiment of life”, he defined skeptics as those who constantly search instead of those who doubt.

10 Darcy Ribeiro (1922-1997). Brazilian anthropologist, educator, environmentalist and politician, whose vast and complex works and interests resist conventional categorizations.

11 Cheryl King (2006) evoked her moving from calling for work in order to be better than our human selves, to work to be just like ourselves without doing too much harm to ourselves, other sentient creatures (like the marine elephants, I guess) and our planet.

12 Idiocy comes from Greek ιδιωσία, private life, and ιδιώτης, private person, rude, unskilled, and inexpert.

13 The pretense of hierarchy, for instance, is to realize a sacred (στροφέω, divine) command (στροφέω, the first, most powerful, master, and στροφέω, to rule, guide, prevail). It would be hard to find any cultural practice without a manifest or unconscious sense of the sacred or ultimate value, as magic, religion, science, art, and other practices, including public policy and theorizing, may testify.