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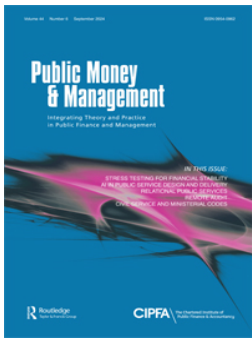
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## Debate: Beyond the New Public Management?

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The continuing crises of public services have been paralleled by a recurring dream of breaking the stranglehold of the New Public Management (NPM) in favour of more user-centred or relational approaches. As Wilson et al. (2024) observe, the death of NPM has been foretold many times—almost as many times as the death of neoliberalism. Our pairing of these terms is hardly accidental. Indeed, as we argued a long time ago, ‘the new managerialism’ was the organizational shadow of neoliberalism, and has proved just as difficult to displace from institutional formations of power (Clarke & Newman, 1997).

The experience of being subjected to the NPM—whether as workers or users of services—has been consistently depressing and demoralizing. But the NPM was never just an unfortunate development that was ill-suited to public services. It was part of a thorough-going transformation of the state and its relations to society and the economy that has persisted for over 40 years. In that time, there have been many attempts to introduce relational approaches: consumerism, co-production, personalization and so on. But all have been subordinated to the prevailing neoliberal imperatives. In the UK, the return of a Labour government committed to sound public financing and wealth creation as the precondition of public service reform should be a clear warning about the persistence of those framing orientations: austerity without the name?

### Beyond optimism?

We found much to appreciate in Wilson et al.’s overview of the tensions involved in the persistence of NPM and the flow of alternative conceptions for organizing public services in more human and humane forms. We share their view that the proclaimed shift from NPM to New Public Governance (or the many alternatives) is not an inevitable development but a site of struggle, although identifying the forces in play remains a significant issue. We were engaged by the central role they give to ‘practice narratives’ and the search for ‘change agents’ who might drive these transformations. Finally, we cannot but endorse their call for a more relational and less detached, or Olympian, role for the academy—whether in the field of public administration or anywhere else.

Nonetheless, we think there are reasons to be sceptical about this determinedly optimistic view of relationships/relations/relationality. Fundamentally, it seems important to insist that relationships are not inherently nice. Rather they are consistently fraught with tensions and conflicts—interpersonally, organizationally, politically. More abstractly,

Wilson et al. seem to conflate relationships (as forms of everyday connection) and relationality (the ‘relational turn’ in the social sciences: 2024). But both abstractly and concretely, we see no basis for treating relationality as essentially progressive. On the contrary, from domestic violence to fascism, from extractive capitalism to the varieties of racism, we are embedded in relations that are centred on the reproduction of inequalities of many kinds.

Bringing this back to public services demands that we ask carefully what sorts of relationships are at stake in public services. Much of the ‘practice narratives’ approach is driven by public service professionals, academics, think tanks and consultancies. In the enthusiasm for ‘partnerships’, ‘equitable horizontal relationships’ and ‘empowered, active citizens’ (Wilson et al., 2024), we hear echoes of obligatory participation: citizens summoned to ‘do their bit’ at the bidding of those who always seem to know better, making the citizen self responsible for enacting governing ambitions (Newman, 2017). A long history of innovations—from personalization through empowerment to co-production—have ‘variously promised to reshape relations between citizens and public sector professionals within more emotionally attuned and personally responsive ways ... these “more human” qualities often invoke a benign and de-politicised version of human relations’ (Jupp et al., 2017, pp. 10–12).

### Looking for power and politics

Pressing questions of power and politics remain frustratingly absent. For example, what might be the relationship between political leadership and the projected co-creation of services in partnerships between professionals and users? What would be the implications of newly empowered front-line workers (even as the location of the front line becomes more and more elusive in processes of devolution, contracting out and voluntary action)? Humphris’s study (2019) of devolved front-line work in relation to mothers, welfare and citizenship raises troubling issues about discretion and how its exercise is shaped. Embodying the state in practice always carries with it unequal distributions of power across all varieties of public provision from the most (apparently) benign to the most coercive. Across these services, how are alliances to be built?

In conclusion, perhaps we should also be asking what has sustained NPM despite the proliferation of alternatives? Its promises continue to seduce, particularly in times of ‘fiscal realism’ and austerity driven budgets. Indeed, NPM’s claims to realism (discipline, target setting and performance

management) have exercised a magical appeal for politicians of many sorts seeking to exercise control. Fiscal discipline remains a potent desire, while the mechanistic promise of 'having levers to pull' continues to capture the souls of those who want to be in charge. And for generations of public service managers, schooled in NPM thinking, letting go of the fantasies of control remains unthinkable: in universities, local authorities, academy trusts and the like, managers still cherish their 'right to manage'.

### Disclosure statement

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