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BOOK REVIEW

Parallax Views on a Prophet, Properly Understood

Margaret Stout and Jeannine M. Love. *Integrative Process: Follettian Thinking from Ontology to Administration*. Anoka, MN: Process Century Press, 2015.

Reviewed by Matthew Witt

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Mary Parker Follett was a writer well ahead of her times, then and still; enigmatic in ways that may partially explain her itinerant popularity since the pinnacle of her success and acclaim in the 1920s. The range of her reception helps contextualize why the systematic review of her work produced by authors Stout and Love is so important. Feldheim (1994) finds that Follett's cyclical popularity corresponds inversely with geopolitical militarism: when confronting crises, nation-states move toward greater centralization of decision-making and hierarchic organizational control. Parker and Ritson (2005) reason that Follett, like scores of other management theorists anointed "guru" status, has been appropriated by fads and bandwagon fervor for selective distortion of her oeuvre. Management consulting helps propagate this dynamic by recurrently pitching packaged prescriptions for chronic and malingering organizational woes. Ryan and Rutherford (2000) pinpoint how Follett's equal emphasis on both individualism and collectivism grates against a traditional and enduring individual/collectivist dichotomy in management literature. Eylon (1998) finds this dichotomy indicative of management ambivalence toward the paradox that worker empowerment forever poses for organizational praxis. Mendenhall, Macomber, and Cutright (2000) find Follett's work an early harbinger of theories of chaos and complexity not readily assimilated to management praxis. Writing in 1994 in P. Graham's edited volume, *Mary Parker Follett: Prophet of Management*, Harvard management theorist Nitin Nohria (1994) canvassed the itinerant popularity of Mary Parker Follett, summing up how she has been made a "beacon for change that we can keep striving for and at times—albeit imperfectly and, alas, fleetingly—achieve" (p. 162).

Identifying the matrix into which iconic thinkers must be placed is the sort of work only the most intrepid scholars successfully accomplish; and even then, usually only so far as a synthesis

of major themes. That challenging goal is met and surpassed by authors Margaret Stout and Jeannine M. Love in their outstanding work, *Integrative Process: Follettian Thinking from Ontology to Administration*, a must read for any social thinker serious about the relevance of relational process thought from ontology to praxis; or as they put it, from the academy to the “everyday micro-processes that will ultimately reshape the macro-modalities” of our world (Stout & Love, 2015, p. 276). More than synthesis, this is a work of exegetical relevance, deserving a prominent place in the Follettian canon.

The book opens with an exposition of the ontological premises that determine the base structure (and back-beat, or “weft thread,” as the authors denote) of the ensuing chapters, furnishing the reader with the essential conceptual syntax giving shape to Follett’s peripatetic scholarship. The authors very deliberately deploy a Weberian approach to ideal typing, in this instance utilizing ontology and language, psychosocial theory, epistemology, and beliefs (covered in Chapters 2–4, respectively) to stage the book’s interpretive analysis of how ethics, political theory, economic theory, and administration are prefigured by shared philosophical grounding; an ontological backdrop that is too often assumed to be settled matter by academic work in these domains. A major motivation behind the work was to square the tendencies noted in the opening paragraph of this review against careful and systematic explication. Follett cultivated a distinctive nomenclature and writing style tailored to her process purposes, susceptible to shallow and selective reading of her nuanced notional constructs. Sensitive to this matter, Stout and Love opt to allow Follett to speak for herself throughout much of their work, interweaving her distinctive phrasing and authorial voice. Doing so enlivens their book while making clear how otherwise elusive Follett’s ideas can be without diligent attention to their syntax, valence, and flow. Besides a careful (re)construction of Follett’s oeuvre as it pertains to the authors’ ambition—a comprehensive theory of governance (see Stout and Love, Chapter 13, 2015)—the book includes a chapter positioning Follett within current intellectual challenges and world crises (environmental, economic, and social), and other chapter material pinpointing the relevance of Follettian praxis for administrative contexts and related practical applications.

In a passage from an essay entitled “Co-ordination” (published posthumously in 1949), Follett limns, in idiom that is remarkably contemporary, “We cannot get rid of our joint obligation by finding the fraction of our own therein, because our own part is not a fraction of the whole, it is in a sense the whole” (Follett, 1949/2015, p. 74, in Stout & Love, 2015, p. 108). This fractal formulation—the whole inherent in the part—is a major feature of one of Follett’s central ontological motifs: the “situation” and its constituent “laws”. Traversing how the situation and the laws governing its actualization (its “integrative processes”) take shape from (and give shape to) the shop floor, the neighborhood, the broader community, the statehouse, and beyond, is a path prone to epistemological slippage(s). In Chapter 13 of their work, Stout and Love bring together warp-and-weft threads of their own, mapping Follett’s concerns about the exploitation of the environment, unregulated production and commerce, and the treatment of labor onto contemporary consideration of these (now global, systemwide) crises. The authors give a diligent and searching account of major themes keyed to these matters (globalization, neoliberalism, and climate change). For this reader, some added consideration would help allay a perennial criticism of Follett and kindred pragmatist thinking (as with the work of John Dewey and William James): the praxis these important thinkers advocate takes too little consideration of power asymmetry and the propensity for elites to subvert the will of the demos; artifice (subversions of epistemology) prefiguring what the public takes to be settled facts. Stout

and Love caution in their work that “critique is not enough.” Taking seriously this challenge requires considering when not enough critique has been considered.

In her major work of political theory, *The New State: Group Organization the Solution of Popular Government*, Follett (1918/1998) took aim at the errors and conceits of Enlightenment preoccupations with the individual and the contortions made of the individual by the social contract theory of the era:

The Reformation of the sixteenth century was an individualistic movement. The apotheosis of the individual, however, soon led us astray, involving as it did an entirely erroneous notion of the relation of the individual to society, and gave us the false political philosophy of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Men thought of individuals as separate and then had to invent fictions to join them, hence the social contract fiction” (Follett, 1918/1998, p. 162, in Stout & Love, 2015, p. 134).

Follett’s concerns with how to formulate “a better unity” than what contract theorists formulate (from Hobbes’s *Leviathan* to Montesquieu’s *Spirit of the Laws*) is of a piece with her concerns for how relationships everywhere are given shape by *real* (ontological) laws prior to (*a priori*) *social* fictions. Nineteenth-century corrections to this individualist orientation, Follett reasoned incisively, erred by excessive emphasis on balancing competing, plural interests; to which she retorts: “We now see the false psychology underlying compromise and concession. Their practical futility has long been evident: whenever any difference is ‘settled’ by concession, that difference pops up again in some other form” (Follett 1919, p. 576 in Stout & Love, 2015, p. 134); from which she derives, “Nothing will ever truly settle differences but synthesis” (Follett 1919, p. 576 in Stout & Love, 2015, p. 134).

To be fair and judicious, contract theory’s concerns with individual rights, liberties, and obligations hail from concrete intellectual dilemmas with how to establish rights *a priori* to statutory law, and also with formulating prudent limitations upon states that during that era were morphing into nations. The fealty oaths and indentured relations that determined a millennium of social order were, for Enlightenment thinkers, “the social contract fiction” that needed to be given account at that time. For these matters, Follett’s emphasis on synthesis via the circuits of integrative processes scalable upwards from workplace dyads to “New States” is a lofty and amiable challenge staked out prudentially by Stout and Love, one prone to gushing hagiography on the one hand, shallow criticism on the other hand; partial formulations that the authors give important account and dressing down (Chapter 11).

But other matters linger, as with what is given account by the expanding literature under the rubric “state crimes against democracy,” which Stout and Love would find falls under criticism that is not enough. Yet, failing to take full account of such practices as vote rigging, campaign fixing through (in)judicial arrangements (e.g., Citizens United), false-flag militarism, regulatory brinkmanship (e.g., mortgage fraud), political assassination, financial espionage and arbitrage, and the parapolitical routines of shadow governing agencies (FBI’s, NSA’s, CIA’s across the globe), reduces the state-making aspirations of Folletian praxis to hortatory incantations bracketed by “ifs/thens/woulds/shoulds.” *If* we understood the integrative properties of relational systems (situations and their laws, in Follett’s formulation), *then* we *would* realize that the cascading and iterative crises of our times (failures of relational integration everywhere) present us with opportunities to recast our relationships and comprehensions of system complexity, making clear how we *should* realize the imperative of freedom by association in

adherence with the law of the situation, properly understood. Meanwhile, who “we” are at any given node in this network of relational processes (from shop floor and beyond) is not a straightforward matter, fractal social geometries notwithstanding.

Yes (with Stout and Love): the “colonization of the lifeworld” of which Habermas (1962) forewarned us in the 1960s is now fully actualized by the integrated spectacle Debord (1992) articulated three decades later (almost 25 years ago). But the techniques (the *dispositif*, in Foucauldian parlance) of this mass dispossession hew to etiology that warrants fuller account by governance theorists. Brown (2015) is succinct in this regard, writing in *Undoing the Demos*:

In this context, outsourcing, downsizing, salary and benefits reductions, along with slashed public services all present themselves as business decisions, not political ones. This also means that when economic “reality” requires it, even the most thoroughly responsabilized [*sic*] individuals may be legitimately cast off from the ship. Human capital for itself bears the responsibility of enhancing and securing its future; it is expected to self-invest wisely and is condemned for dependency. However, human capital for the firm or the nation is bound to the project of the whole and is valued according to macroeconomic vicissitudes and exigencies. This means that neither its responsibility nor its fealty guarantees its survival. It also means that the solidarity and sacrifice that workers once directed towards unions in the form of union dues, stay-aways, or strikes are now redirected toward capital and the state in the form of accepting layoffs, furloughs, and reduced hours and benefits. It means tolerating the substitution of undocumented or prison labor for one’s own or losing business to firms with access to such labor. It means willingness to suffer regressive taxation and bankrupt state coffers on the rationale that corporate and mineral extraction taxes discourage investment, chase away businesses, or stymie growth (Brown, 2015, pp. 211–212).

There is ontology here, too. In short, we have transitioned from a mid-twentieth-century ethos, where human aspirations were assets to be developed in and of themselves into “human capital,” now viewed as risks posed to the state (in the form of demands for clean air, water, useful and dignified employment, food, adequate housing, medical care, and education) that need managing, this or that relational process notwithstanding. The source of that expectational legitimacy—the centuries-long development of natural law entitlements—is of a piece with the social contract theories that Follett is herself so (otherwise rightly) dubious of. But for a lack of systemic and systematic accounting of elite criminality normalized through the *dispositif* of discipline, punishment, and control (*raison d’état*—old, newer, and ongoing), there will remain variance in the laws governing momentous situations that Follettian praxis will be impotent to face down until who “we” are is better settled. The work Stout and Love have produced deserves wide reading and discussion for its outstanding exegesis and careful consideration of praxis into who we might be, and also inquiry about who we currently are that remains in parallax view.

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