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Promoting Social Equity in Public Administration: A Much Needed Topic in the Twenty-First Century

Norman J. Johnson and James H. Svara, eds., Justice for All: Promoting Social Equity in Public Administration (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2009). 336 pp. \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN: 9780765630261; \$44.95 (paper), ISBN: 9780765630261.

H. George Frederickson first introduced the term “social equity” to public administration during the 1960s, soon after the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) created the Standing Panel on Social Equity in Governance. The panel defines social equity as follows:

The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair, just and equitable distribution of public services and implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice, and equity in the formation of public policy.

Academics have made mild attempts in the field to adopt social equity as a serious area of inquiry, in the way that, for example, state and local government and budgeting are treated. This fact is notable, particularly after the creation of the Standing Panel on Social Equity in Governance.

Justice for All: Promoting Social Equity in Public Administration, edited by Norman J. Johnson (no relation to reviewer) and James H. Svara, makes a strong and often lacking contribution to both the social equity and public administration literatures. The editors sagely suggest in their introduction that social equity has not received the attention that other academic areas have received over the last several decades. This fact readily can be confirmed by merely reviewing the available faculty postings from many U.S. public administration programs looking to hire new faculty at any rank. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find a posting that includes social equity as a wanted or preferred area of research and teaching (Johnson 2011).

Johnson and Svara’s book contains three distinct sections, which address the issue of social equity as a much-needed and continued pillar of public administration, as suggested by NAPA. The sections are “Context and Background” (part I), “Measuring Social Equity” (part II), and “Leadership, Outreach, and Organizational Development” (part III).

The first section of Johnson and Svara’s book provides the reader with some context and history of social equity in the United States. Some MPA students may find this section uninteresting and perhaps even unnecessary. But

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Johnson and Svara were wise to include it, as it provides a critical framework for the remaining two sections of the book. It also offers an important backdrop for and commentary on some of the injustices that have taken place in the United States. Topics treated in this section include social equity in relation to other themes in public administration, as well as in relation to development, to urban inequality, and to the economics of diversity.

The first section of Johnson and Svara's book is also important because it underscores the lack of justice that many marginalized groups have been afforded in this country. Specifically, one of the themes explored in this section is the economic disparities between the wealthiest and the poorest citizens of the United States. Public administration scholars have written very little about the harsh economic disparities that have afflicted and continue to afflict the very fabric of this country.

Of particular interest in this section is Barbara Robles's chapter, "Historical and Policy Dimensions of Inequality in Income and Wealth" (chapter 3), as it does a fine job of intersecting the status of marginalized groups with the absence of social equity in terms of income distribution and property ownership. It is no secret that communities of color, single women, and the very poor continue to lag behind their white counterparts in terms of home ownership, inheritance, and capital. Indeed, the system of wealth was not created with the intention of sharing the economic pie equally among all citizens of the United States. In turn, with few exceptions (e.g., Oldfield, Candler, and Johnson 2006), public administration scholars have been remiss in writing about these critical social equity issues.

The second section of the book goes about measuring social equity in the policy areas of health care, education, criminal justice, and the environment. One of the most exciting chapters in this section addresses the relationship between social equity, environmental justice, and planning. Johnson and Svara were wise to include environmental justice in their text, as this topic is often left out of the social equity literature. Sylvester Murray and Mark D. Hertko's "Environmental Justice and Land Use Planning" (chapter 10) provides the reader with a daunting account of why federal, state, and local agencies must be involved in the regulation of space in neighborhoods and cities, with particular emphasis on the impact on vulnerable groups.

To illustrate the environmental impact of land-use decisions on vulnerable populations, take, for example, the case of environmental pollution in New York City (not included in the book). In a study of the impact of pollution on youth in New York City (Fernandez 2006), the researchers discovered that the South Bronx had some of the highest asthma rates in the city and perhaps the state. The high asthma rates for adolescents resulted in 7,000 asthma-related hospital

stays and deaths during the time of the study. The researchers linked cases of asthma in the South Bronx to the high exhaust fumes coming from trucks, cars, and other air pollutants associated with the location of the neighborhood and its nearby highways. It has taken the intervention of the U.S. Environment Protection Agency to request that New York State submit a report on how it plans to reduce such pollutants, especially in poorer areas of the state. This example helps illustrate the need to include environmental justice policy in the social equity literature as people's lives continue to be affected negatively.

The higher asthma rates of adolescents in the South Bronx and the other local government case studies presented in chapter 10—Austin, Texas; Chester, Pennsylvania; Algeld Gardes, Chicago, Illinois; St James Parish, Louisiana; and Huntington Park, California—serve as a solid reminder of why environmental justice must continue to be tied to the social equity literature. They also clarify why public administration and public service are concerned with social equity.

The final section of Johnson and Svara's book addresses the need for social equity in public organizations and the leadership required for progress to occur. Topics in this section include policy entrepreneurship, agency performance, and human resource management as they relate to the goal of moving toward social equity. The most striking chapter in the third section is Susan T. Gooden and Blue Wooldridge's "Integrating Social Equity into the Core Human Resource Management Course" (chapter 13). Unlike the focus of the other chapters on public institutions, Gooden and Wooldridge tackle the importance of academic reform as a way to infuse social equity into the MPA curriculum. They argue specifically for the need to increase student exposure to social equity through the examination of formal and informal personnel policies and practices in public agencies.

An example of the type of curriculum reforms that Gooden and Wooldridge write about in their chapter is Martha Dede's article in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* (2002), in which she describes her attempt to revamp her MPA human resource management capstone project. However, despite her success, Dede did not link social equity with the topic matter of the course or the capstone project, most likely because social equity was not on Dede's radar as an issue to tackle.

There are indeed very few attempts to link social equity in human resource management courses, despite the fact that faculty such as Mitchell Rice and the late Philip Rutledge have been leading the charge for years. In their chapter, Gooden and Wooldridge offer the reader concrete evidence as to why integrating social equity in this course is important. Specifically, the authors offer three social equity lessons associated

with the human resource issues of job analysis, recruitment, and selection of public sector employees, and they point to the absence of social equity concerns associated with these processes. The illustrated vacuum in Dede's capstone project suggests the relevance and urgency of the ideas that Gooden and Wooldridge propose in their chapter, as change in a curriculum often happens one course and/or one professor at a time.

While timely and well written, Johnson and Svara's *Justice for All* does have some limitations that are worth noting. The first is the repetitive efforts to define social equity within many of the chapters, which only serves as a distraction. The editors would have been wise to coordinate such definitions centrally, because the repetition detracts from some of the book's more salient and relevant points. It would be different if there were some debate among the contributors over the scope or nature of the definition. But most draw directly from NAPA's Standing Panel on Social Equity in Governance. While it is not clear whether using the panel definition was a condition for writing the individual book chapters, it would have been much more useful and interesting to motivate the contributors to define social equity from their own perspectives and using diverse sources.

The second limitation of Johnson and Svara's book is the absence of any chapters addressing social equity and the intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity. This omission begs the question as to how such an oversight could happen, given recent trends such as the legalization of same-sex marriage being put to the test in state governments across the United States. Indeed, twenty-first-century America is still a country where students commit suicide because of school bullying over sexual orientation and where transgender employees are routinely terminated from their jobs for being differently gendered.

It is surprising that attention to this marginalized group was not included in a 2011 public administration book

on social equity. Such an omission sends a harmful message that only reinforces the continuing invisibility of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. In fact, the tendency today is to bring this topic center stage in many relevant institutions. For example, the LGBT Political Science Caucus is planning to boycott the American Political Science Association's 2012 national convention in New Orleans, citing the unfair treatment of the LGBT community in the state of Louisiana.

Johnson and Svara missed an opportunity to discuss the injustices that members of this community face on a daily basis. How many more students and adults must commit suicide because of the bullying that they endure in school and in the workplace before we give this topic its due?

In conclusion, despite the few limitations of *Justice for All: Promoting Social Equity in Public Administration*, the book makes an important contribution to both the social equity and public administration literatures. Johnson and Svara have done a fine job of assembling some of the more thought-provoking topics on social equity that this reviewer has read.

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