

## Book Review

Tammy Findlay

*Femocratic Administration: Gender, Governance, and Democracy in Ontario*

Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2015

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Before anyone leaps to the wrong conclusion, Tammy Findlay's new book about women in public sector administration does not purport to describe a bureaucracy in which women are dominant as "aristocratic" implies control by a select few or "democratic" by the majority or, less kindly, by the "mob." Her term is not original and its history is slightly controversial, but she uses it as something of a conflation of "feminist" and "democratic."

The presumption upon which her work is based is that "there is a pressing need for the state to address unequal relations of power [that are] evident all around us." These inequalities are based on divisions according to class, race and gender. They are empirically verified by even the most cursory examination of pertinent data and can be denied only by those who prefer ideology to evidence-based argument.

For Findlay, feminism isn't *only* about the systemic discrimination against women. It also offers singularly useful methods to probe other dimensions of inequality and inequity. She speaks, for example, of a "feminist political economy" that conjoins fruitful analyses of social relations and practical strategies to "democratize" society. Of course, her main focus in this book is on the public sector. "Public administration," she says, "has remained largely unaffected by feminist analysis." It is a problem she intends to address.

One of the most important feminist interventions ... has been to expand our definition of the 'political' beyond the institutions of the state to include other political terrain, including non-governmental organizations and social movements, and those relations previously considered to be private, such as the family. – Tammy Findlay

To accomplish her task, Dr. Findlay concentrates on a particular organization, the Ontario Women's Directorate (OWD) as it functioned during a specific time period, 1985-2000. Her themes include questions of power and gender; but, she is under no illusion that, despite its somewhat aspirational title, the OWD succeeded in transforming the Ontario public service or even in establishing a distinctively and permanently successful experiment in feminist innovation. Before discussing the substance of her work, however, I want to make a preliminary methodological point and an introductory theoretical point.

Findlay has produced what is commonly known as a case study. Like biographies of important historical figures, case studies are normally about singularities rather than deeper structural patterns and contextual dynamics. Biographies focus on the qualities of their subjects. They are meant to inspire admiration (or, sometimes, loathing). They intend to teach lessons about how great achievements (or, sometimes, great failures) result from the attitudes and actions of extraordinary people. Gibbon's magisterial work on the decline and fall of the Roman Empire and endless narratives about the lives of villains from Adolph Hitler serial killers notwithstanding, the bulk of such studies are mainly meant to tell us what to do in order to take advantage of circumstances and to impose our various wills in pursuit of our personal ambitions or, in somewhat less frequent instances, to contribute to the benefit of the organizations in which we function or the well-being of the society which we inhabit.

While being a case study, Findlay's book does considerably more than can usually be found in such work. She has conducted a large number of interviews and examined an extensive array of pertinent documents, from which she has built a compelling narrative. Her book is replete with revealing anecdotes and insights into the personal prejudices, political positions and policy proposals put forward by political leaders, senior public servants and advocates from civil (and occasionally uncivil) society. A meritworthy example of the case study genre, *Femocratic Administration* meets all the current criteria for academic success.

Tammy Findlay, however, has done much more than meet and exceed the standards of her discipline. In fact, she doesn't even get around to discussing the OWD until half-way through the book (page 104 of a 216-page narrative). The first half sets the context for the detailed account that follows and does so admirably.

State administration is crucial to the transformational feminist project. – Tammy Findlay
--

One important theme that runs throughout her argument is a welcome claim that government matters. A great deal of feminist writing has focused on "identity politics," and concerned itself with microlevel issues, questions of language and the rhetoric of inclusiveness. Above all, one of the second wave of feminism's primary slogans, "the personal is political," has dominated in many sectors of feminist thought and action. At the same time, a good deal of gender-relevant sociological research has relied on data-driven demonstrations that women's income, academic achievements and records of success in employment and promotion in government, academia, business and industry, and science and technology remain behind men's. In both cases—a preoccupation with self-esteem on the one hand and a rehearsal of sterile statistics on the other—two things are lost. One is the overall structure of power in late capitalism and the other is that the crucial role of government is sidelined. For Findlay, this will not do. "Democratic administration," she argues, "entails a reconfiguration of the relationship between the state and society." And, finally, she insists that "it is a reply to neoliberalism,

positing that only more democratic and participatory governance can challenge the growing inequality and polarization in Canada.

Misogyny, prejudice and discrimination against women, for Findlay, are not the only dimensions of inequity and injustice; but, feminism and feminist theory are uniquely capable of theorizing inequality and injustice in a way that provides the needed foundation for multidimensional social change. In the process, Findlay contends that the reformation of politics and the state is essential and that public administration theory cannot continue to be “innocent of a feminist theoretical perspective” (Stivers, 1993). She backs up her contention with some of the tidiest commentaries on the related issues of Neoliberalism and New Public Management that I have seen in some time.

Neoliberalism is a repackaged version of classical liberalism, which seeks to limit the states reach into (and therefore democratic control over) the market. – Tammy Findlay

As Findlay astutely points out, “while neoliberals purport to advance politically neutral values, the inherently political nature of neoliberalism is clear in its policy preferences. These preferences include lowering taxes, cutting social spending, privatizing, deregulation, downsizing, contracting out, weakening the power of labour unions, monetarism (low inflation and debt/deficit reductions), and free trade and capital flows.”

The pertinent effects of these policies are made clear and they all contribute to a “propensity for advantaging the powerful and disadvantaging the already marginalized, due to their race, gender, class, (dis)ability, or sexual orientation.” Her expressed purpose is to confront these practices and their sustaining ideology. She seeks to expose “neoliberalism as a fundamentally political and destructive project, which, at its base, is about the undermining of democracy.” In this, she succeeds admirably. As well, she sees the “democratization of the state as the only path to take us beyond neoliberalism.” In this, her claim is excessive. Democratizing the state is surely not the *only* path, but it is a *necessary* one and, perhaps, the most important.

In the second half of the book, *Femocratic Administration* largely utilizes both institutional research including documentary and archival sources as well as what is commonly called qualitative research. The former is given life by an abundance of interviews with “femocrats” and the politicians to whom they reported in governments displaying three different political party banners and three putatively different political philosophies.

The result is a far more serious work than a “how-to” pamphlet for feminist reformers in the public sector. It explores the overarching (and underpinning) concepts of bureaucracy, democracy, representation and, of course, feminism itself. It also gets down to nitty-gritty issues including a number of the policies and programs developed, pursued and (to a greater or lesser extent) implemented by the OWD. She is not uncritical. The OWD had all sorts of problems both

in terms of opposition from other parts of government and within its own structure and personnel.

That the OWD came into existence at all is a testament to those who preceded it. (Full disclosure: in the 1970s, I had friends in the antecedent “Women’s Bureau” in the Ontario Department of Labour and came to know, albeit second-hand, many of the sometimes false hopes and consequent frustrations of people whose mission was to grow healthy blooms in somewhat infertile and sometimes toxic soil.) No one, however, should be uncertain about its role. Findlay quotes NDP cabinet minister Marion Boyd extensively:

We know that the women’s directorate was formed as a gesture. It was never intended to be a pro-active, radical piece. It was a Directorate, not Ministry, so it was without portfolio. It didn’t have a Deputy Minister, it just had a Director. ... The people who were there on the bureaucratic side ... were relatively comfortable with that because it meant they didn’t have to be terribly accountable ... [and] they didn’t have much clout.

Even with its limited mandate, the extent of the resistance that the OWD encountered is remarkable. Findlay mentions, for instance, a cabinet document that complained about the mere use of the word “equity, claiming that it might “send negative signals to the business community.” In fact, even during the NDP administration, persistent efforts to perform “equity analysis” and to generate a “policy critique” raised concerns that such activities would have a “negative impact on the credibility of the OWD and put the line ministries on defense.”

What is plain to me, at least, is that the political culture—in and out of governance—during this time was resistant to expanded notions of justice, equity, and democracy. (Second full disclosure: during the period of Findlay’s study, I was a steward in Local 560 of the Ontario Public Service Employees Union with first-hand knowledge and, perhaps, mildly prejudiced perceptions of provincial politics and administration throughout). Accordingly, while assiduously detailing this history of the OWD, Findlay properly acknowledges that the work of the OWD led to “a heightened profile, vigorous feminist debates over fundamental issues of representation and transformation, and a rich policy agenda” in its early years. Considering what came next in the form of the post-1996 Conservative regime’s unrepentant and rigid neoliberal policies and procedures, it is difficult not to “romanticize” or to indulge in “nostalgia” for the 1985-1995 decade. The 1996-2000 period witnessed an unrelenting attack on the core values of femocratic administration, the further weakening of the public sector and targeted assaults on health, education, environmental protection, public housing, childcare and pay equity programs that combined with robust initiatives in downsizing, privatization and commercialization of vital public services—often with lethal consequences.

Tammy Findlay makes a strong case for relegitimizing the public sector and reclaiming initiatives abandoned, sold cheaply to the private sector or made the project of private-public-partnerships in which profits are normally won by private business whereas risks are taken and losses are absorbed by the public. In making her argument for the revitalization of the state, however, it is important to understand that Findlay is *not* attempting to reauthorize the “Weberian” model that “revolves around the organizational principles of hierarchy, compartmentalization, and neutrality” and therefore diminishes equality, interconnectedness and advocacy.” Instead, she sees virtue in the process of “deprivatizing” not only essential services for the safety and security of people and property, but also of advocating public responsibility for social opportunity and justice and meaningful democratic representation and participation in our common future.

Democratic administration will help to create the conditions needed in Canada for a socially just alternative to global capitalism. – Tammy Findlay
---

On the one hand, Findlay writes, “femocratic administration is about keeping the state at the forefront of contestations over equality, participation and democracy” rather than either surrendering to the private sector and its market fetishism or dumping unprofitable but essential services on the volunteer sector, non-profits and civil society. On the other hand, it aims to promote both procedural (participatory) and substantive (equity) democracy. It does so by opening the political system up to autonomous communities, empowering the marginalized and challenging the dominant corporate institutions—both private and public—which now define the terms of acceptable discourse and the boundaries of permissible debate. This, of course, requires a radical break from the image of monolithic authority structures and the expansion and simultaneous democratization of public space. Above all, it requires an experimental approach in which risks must be taken, ambiguities must be embraced and imaginations must be counterpoised to the politics of resignation and what is called cynicism (Kariel, 1968).

Innovation within the existing political paradigm has the potential mainly to make toxic processes more efficient—and therefore even more harmful than they currently are. Innovation in the interest of public sector reform, on the other hand, has the potential to *improve* rather than merely *accelerate* change. Findlay’s conclusion pushes past the limits of nominal institutional reform that seldom exceed superficial “rebranding.” It goes to the heart of a transformative process. Instead of the still dominant neoliberal public sector paradigm with its infatuation with business models, market mechanisms and appeals to efficiency, accountability and customer service, *Femocratic Administration* points toward a redefinition of the entire set of relationships among the state, the public service and the public itself.

**About the Reviewer:**

**Howard A. Doughty** teaches cultural anthropology and political economy at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at [howarddoughty67@gmail.com](mailto:howarddoughty67@gmail.com).

**References**

Kariel, H. 1968. *Open systems: Arenas for political action*. Itasca, IL: Peacock.

Stivers, C. 1993. *Gender images in public administration: Legitimacy and the administrative state*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.