Coming to Terms With the Public-Private Partnership

A Grammar of Multiple Meanings

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This essay critically examines the multiple meanings that the term, public-private (P-P) partnership, assumes in contemporary discussions. A brief deconstruction of this term not only clarifies these meanings, but also exposes to scrutiny their underlying premises and ideological commitments. Six distinct uses of the term are identified and linked to their respective meanings in neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies. Instead of focusing on partnership's conceptual definition, the term's strategic uses by political actors are attended to, consistent with the author's interest in partnership as a political symbol and policy tool. Accordingly, the claims of these actors about partnerships receive primary attention here. Their actual partnership practices and the distributional effects that partnering has on power and resources are left for others to consider.

The P-P partnership, as a rubric for describing cooperative ventures between the state and private business, currently enjoys remarkable acclaim in both official and scholarly circles. Organizations ranging from the European Union to Canadian Heritage not only endorse the partnership idea but actively employ it as a programmatic tool for adapting to what they perceive as changing needs and circumstances (Kinnock, 1998; Canadian Heritage, 1996). Further, its advocates tout it as the epitome of a new generation of management reforms, especially suited to the contemporary economic and political imperatives for efficiency and quality. Despite momentum gathered since the late 1980s, and its present status as a de rigueur reform, the partnership is not new to governance. More than a decade earlier, without the fanfare or reformist cachet, partnerships were deployed by the federal government in the United States as a tool for stimulating private investment in inner-city infrastructure. Likewise, partnerships were key to coordinating federal initiatives in regional economic development. The record of these devices through the 1970s is at best mixed (Stephenson, 1991). How can we account for its reincarnation in the 1990s as a reform on the bleeding edge?
The simple answer in this instance raises only an unsatisfying irony. The P-P partnership is frequently viewed as a derivative of the privatization movement, which captivated conservative leaders in western liberal regimes on both sides of the Atlantic throughout much of the 1980s. Public asset sales, outsourcing (e.g., procurement contracts), and load shedding (e.g., divestiture) that occurred in these regimes was nominally intended to discipline the provision of services with competitive market pressures (Kettl, 1993). The rationale was that private providers would provide higher quality goods and services at lower cost, and the government sector of public providers would shrink accordingly. Conversely, the hallmark of partnerships is cooperation—not competition; the disciplining mechanism is not customer exit or thin profit margins, but a joint venture that spreads financial risks between public and private sectors. Joint-venture arrangements actually stabilize volatile markets and work to mitigate competitive pressures, not exploit them. Rather than struggling to redefine the boundary between public and private, with the former typically ceding territory to the latter, partnering works to blur them (Starr, 1990). It remains, then, an anomaly relative to contemporary ways of separating public from private.

The idea of government and business partnering for some common purpose evokes images of wartime solidarity and memories of small town life in America, where business and local government shared talent and community responsibilities. It seems to draw on communal traditions of cooperation that are, at once, vaguely familiar and socially valued. Of course, when we scratch the surface of these arrangements over the past century, the spectacle of machine politics, of graft and corruption, shines through. Part of the impetus for the growth of the liberal state was to inhibit these kinds of cooperative ventures by carefully defining and then policing the boundaries between public and private (Starr, 1990). This entailed both an elaborate overlay of administrative law on public sector activity, and a burgeoning regulatory apparatus to protect the public interest from private ones. For some, notably the critics of interest-group pluralism, the overlay was inadequate to the task. Nevertheless, the resulting partisan alignments, at least in the Anglo-American experience, were basically contests over the hegemony of one sector over the other (Jacobs, 1997). In this context, the movement for privatization in the 1980s endorsed the existence of a clear boundary separating the two sectors by contesting the division of responsibility between them. The partnership idea represents a different set of conceptual premises altogether.

FROM PRIVATIZATION TO PARTNERSHIP

According to its proponents, partnerships (among other things) require actors from each sector to adopt characteristics and points of view that once defined and stabilized the identities of their counterparts. Government actors would need to think and behave like entrepreneurs, and business actors would
need to embrace public interest considerations and expect greater public accountability. Here, the elaborate demarcations that defined roles and set the rules of engagement between business and government since the Progressive Era are, in large part, elided, removing the impetus for the adversarial character of their interactions. Moreover, the legal doctrine that professionalized the civil service in western liberal regimes and institutionalized public accountability through administrative procedure is being altered in certain states to support partnering arrangements. In Italy, for example, civil service reforms are eliminating many of the features of public sector careers that distinguished them from private sector employment (Supiot, 1996). Rulemaking procedures, once at the heart of command-and-control regulation in the United States, have been amended to center on negotiation among stakeholders (Negotiated Rulemaking Act, 1990). In short, the ground appears to have shifted under the postwar contest between the liberal state and its free-market opponents. Rapprochement of a sort lurks behind the partnership rhetoric.

More generally, the points of reference defining the binary separation of public from private, in welfare economics and liberal political doctrine alike, have been confounded by complex, variegated views of multiple sectors, including civil, intimate and dialogical realms, anchored to distinctive notions of social relations and political order. Use of the terms, public and private, now suggests any of a variety of social differentiations, not all of which translate into bipolar struggles for hegemony (Weintraub, 1997). To say that partnerships are yet another antiliberal effort to shrink the state by privatizing its functions is to misconstrue the significance of the partnership idea. First, figuratively stretching one sector by shrinking the other simply no longer applies (if it ever did) because the meaning of the sectors themselves is shifting (Feigenbaum, Hamnett, & Henig, 1998). Second, partnership advocates talk of new roles and innovative tools for the public manager, leveraging private capital for policy initiatives. The earlier privatization rhetoric of inefficient government and wasteful programs has largely faded from view, although its partisans remain active (Jack, Phillips, & The Robert Phillips Group, 1993). Part of the enthusiasm surrounding the rebirth of the partnership notion reflects a sense of new possibilities and changing alignments. As I will argue later, this sense reflects, albeit unconsciously, larger changes in the ideological, as well as the conceptual, landscape of governance.

The drive for privatization as a programmatic movement is typically attributed to free-market advocates and conservative politicians, joined in common cause against the liberal welfare state (Starr, 1988). Partnerships arise as a derivative reform in areas where full privatization seems less tractable, perhaps due to technical problems attending the assignment of property rights. If statist responsibilities must extend to certain goods and services, so the logic goes, then the delivery should be through business-mediated arrangements. Complications set in, however, once these ideologies are considered in detail. Part of the force behind privatization came from its status as a portmanteau idea, bringing
together pragmatic reformers and ideologues of different stripes. As we unpack the various lines of reasoning among the constituent ideologies, we find distinctive commitments that partnerships are intended to embody. The more prominent among these ideologies draw upon neoconservative and neoliberal ideas. These will be explored as sources of meaning attached to partnerships. Consequently, the concept of the partnership itself will appear protean, making it less amenable to simple technical or programmatic definition.

Besides the loss of sector boundaries and its accompanying logic, and the ideological splits along new fault lines, the third influence on the rhetoric and significance of the P-P partnership comes from the advocates of management reform. They are providing the operational details and organizational processes for altering traditional governance in fundamental ways. The scope of these initiatives rivals the postwar efforts to reform the civil service. The Public Service Ministry in Britain refers to the partnership idea as central to the New Public Management, perhaps to distance itself from the ill-fated Tory experiment in quasi-autonomous governmental organizations (i.e., quangos; British Council, 1997). In the United States, the reform campaign underway is to reengineer government; the premises and rhetoric can be found in the promotional material of major management consultancies (Reijniers, 1994; Jack et al., 1993; Apen, Benicewicz, & Laia, 1994). Again, governmental and business organizations appear alike in their need to adapt to a global economy, new communications technologies, and growing client pressure for quality. The prescriptions are largely the same, flexible structure, results-oriented processes, and a client-service ethic (Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships, 1996; National Council for Public-Private Partnership, 1997). Partnering then becomes a vehicle for jointly overcoming the few remaining insoluble differences. Once we add an ideological backdrop, however, these forward-looking reforms appear less prescient and more instrumental and opportunistic.

My argument so far links the contemporary renewal of the partnership idea to three kinds of changes. At the most abstract level, there has been extensive theoretical work critically elaborating on, and extending the complexity of, the traditional binary division of sectors into public and private on economistic grounds. This thinking opens up public discourse on distinctive institutional realms and stimulates new ideas about social orderings. In effect, the old compartmentalization of public and private loses its natural appearance and assumes the features of an outmoded artifact of an earlier era (Wolfe, 1997). At a lower level of abstraction comes the influence of political values and commitments that animate contemporary ideological cleavages, at least among liberal constitutional regimes bordering the North Atlantic. The ascendancy of conservative leadership in these regimes throughout the 1980s added status and practical experience to their doctrinal base (Giddens, 1994). These, together with official responsibilities and error, helped splinter the movement into factions but, at the same time, multiplied the plausible alternatives to Progressive-era ideals and to the centrist methods of the postwar welfare state. Finally, at a pragmatic level,
trends in management reform by the early 1990s had turned away from leadership and behavioral principles and toward more structural emphases on flexibility and innovation—reinforcing partnership ideals (Reijniers, 1994).

THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF PARTNERSHIP

With these contextual features in place, we can now attempt to sort out the welter of meanings that P-P partnership assumes in contemporary discussions. As the title suggests, a form of deconstruction is adopted here to unpack the various meanings of the term and expose at least some of their underlying premises and ideological commitments to critical scrutiny. A deconstructive strategy was implicit in the preceding argument’s attention to contexts—conceptual, ideological, and pragmatic—to clarify the production of meaning. My intent in the remainder of the piece, however, is much more modest than a full-blown post-structuralist analysis would admit. I prefer to rely on discursive uses of the term by certain actors rather than on narrative images and stories that evoke the term, because my interest inclines more toward political ideas and policy tools than to representational strategies. Likewise, claims about partnership will receive attention rather than partnership practices, because, at this point at least, I am more interested in conceptual clarification than in the workings of power or patterns of exclusion that partnerships may entail (see Handler, 1996). Finally, my efforts at clarification will not extend much beyond the level of value commitments. Questions of ontology and metaphysical pedigree are left for another time.

To map the discursive terrain, we must first identify some landmark usages that can serve as reference points, and then orient them relative to several fixed ideological projections. The meaning of each usage, not to strain the metaphor too much, comes from clarifying its location relative to other usages and knowing its ideological bearings. For the term, P-P partnership, as a policy device, there are at least six distinct usages that can serve as reference points. These are not mutually exclusive, definitional categories that might serve some taxonomic purpose, but rather are simple meanings attached to the use of the term by certain actors in making claims for its application or adoption. The next step is to orient these relative to several ideologies and identify their most likely attachments.

THE IDEOLOGICAL REFERENTS

The two ideologies represented here both have neo prefixes, indicating a self-conscious split from their respective, institutionalized forms that have been well elaborated in the western political experience. Perhaps with a touch of irony, both neos are reversions to centuries older and, in their view, purer forms. Neoliberalism defines itself in opposition to, what it calls, welfare-state
liberalism, the liberalism of the postwar European labor parties and New Deal democrats. Although aligned philosophically with Lockean individualism, it appears indebted to Scottish enlightenment notions (due to Smith and Hume) of moral regeneration through ownership and market exchange. Its faith in the spontaneous social coordination fostered by market incentives owes much to Hayek. Yet, it is distinguished from contemporary libertarianism by its apparent commitment to progress—material and technological—and a Deweyian pragmatist’s sense of agency.

This sense of agency draws, not so much on the perfectibility notions espoused by the radical left and right, as on faith in human ingenuity and its role in social betterment. Although hardly collectivist and understandably wary of paternalism, neoliberalism bears an intriguing resemblance to the liberalism that Crowley (1987) found in the Progressive Era work of the Webbs, which was typically consigned to the ranks of utopian socialists. Progress, for the Webbs, depended upon innovation, and innovation would come from social experimentation. The neoliberals would agree that social change could be engineered through organizational means, but would prefer Hayek’s entrepreneur in the marketplace to Beatrice Webb’s industrial planner. Still, both see the devising of novel organizational mechanisms, not community solidarity, civic virtue, or individual training, as the key to progress. And both, in varying degrees of course, turn to government as the sponsor or referee.

The second ideology is neoconservatism, formed in part out of disaffection with the anticapitalist sentiments and religiosity of traditional conservatism. Although the neo view of conservatism shares Burkean roots with its parent, it represents an odd amalgam of deference to the sedimented knowledge that tradition conveys, with a Lockean liberal’s faith in self-reliance and commerce as guarantors of human freedom. In doctrinal terms, this translates into an effort to strengthen the local cultural institutions that inculcate traditional values—the family, community churches, and civic associations—while opposing concentrations of power (economic or political) that undermine these values or the social order they reproduce. The liberal welfare state, in its substitution of entitlement for desert, of legalism for virtue, and of paternalism for self-initiative, effectively erodes the cultural basis of social order. Likewise, the mass marketing of large corporations to promote limitless consumption substitutes immediate gratification for self-restraint, celebrity lifestyles for prudent ways of living, and possessive egoism for community service. To be sure, either the state or the corporation can be an ally, should it choose to promote the appropriate cultural attachments and institutions or simply choose to withdraw its substitutions.

Both neo ideologies are typically lumped together under the banner of the New Right, as espousing traditional values and free markets. Ironically, the two claims are contradictory. In historical terms, the market, if anything, has been a de-traditionalizing force, advancing social change, not stability. Participants in unfettered exchanges in the global marketplace are likely to be exposed to sentiments and practices that prove corrosive to their values. Moreover, the sovereign
consumer seeking to satisfy her appetites behaves quite differently than the citizen fulfilling community obligations. We expect the consumer to look outward for opportunities and price signals, and the citizen to look inward to a moral compass pointing the way. There is no guarantee that the two views will coincide. The New Right’s formulation pits virtue against appetite and trusts that the former will triumph. In this context, the market can only make things tougher.

Certainly, one aspect of modernity is a belief that the self can be both citizen and consumer, that we adapt to complexity and social differentiation by proliferating ourselves to suit our social roles. Liberalism in the modern era offers two other solutions that complement this. First, moral sentiments can be fashioned from tastes rather than from virtues, deftly removing one side of the contradiction. This was Bentham’s gift to the modern self. Second, social life can be divided into separate domains, a private one for money and consumption and a public one for power and citizenship; we appear to owe the genesis of this separation to natural law theories of contract (Gobetti, 1997). The New Right takes comfort in neither solution.

To simplify, neoconservatives split with neoliberals over which side of the traditional-values/free-markets contradiction they are willing to entrust with the task of securing a stable social order. Again, neoliberals side with Hayek and the invisible hand; neoconservatives prefer to rely on Berger’s mediating institutions. Contrasting views about the role of the state follow. Collective activity, planned and undertaken by the state, appears to be the antithesis of the private orderings of the market; accordingly, neoliberals presume that it typically interferes (the exception occurs when the state acts to prop-up a failing market or to police market agreements). Similarly, to the extent that state transactions fail to mimic market ones, they are presumed to be inefficient. For neoconservatives, the state has a legitimate role to play in the acculturation of its citizens. The problem with the welfare state is not that it tried to instill a regime of social discipline on the needy, but rather that it was inadequate to the task. Other institutions, especially local ones, in their view, are more suitable and competent. The problem with the state is that it is overextended and it tries to do too much, and consequently, it does not do many things well. Neoliberals want to privatize the state because it is intrinsically inefficient. Neoconservatives want to privatize because the state is perpetually overburdened and underdisciplined; it can control neither its giveaways to the undeserving, nor its appetite for more tax dollars.

**SIX OF THE MEANINGS**

Partnerships have been viewed as a retreat from the hard-line advocacy of privatization. From this perspective, they serve a strategic purpose, enlisting the support of more moderate elements that are less opposed to state action on principle. Partnerships are accommodationist; they hold back the specter of wholesale divestiture and, in exchange, promise lucrative collaboration with the state.
Unfortunately, this picture assumes that everyone sees partnerships in the same way—as a political tool—and that fear of privatization brings the state and its supporters to partner with the privatizers and their beneficiaries, whose successes of late have dwindled. Yet, once we deconstruct the partnership idea, attending to the discursive claims made on its behalf and to the premises that support them, the meanings proliferate. They convey not just strategic aims but normative ones as well.

There are at least six distinctive uses of the term, P-P partnership. Each use makes a claim about what partnerships are and conveys an understanding of their intended purpose and significance. Moreover, each use invokes certain premises about what the relevant problems are to be solved and how best to solve them. The premises of interest here are the ideological ones that form a coherent but largely unassailable set of beliefs and commitments. All six meanings, in my view, can be plausibly related to either neoliberal or neoconservative ideologies. This, of course, matters much more to those would-be supporters of partnerships, who take serious issue with these ideological premises, than it would to their ideological kindred. For those skeptical of partnerships, the discussion to follow may clarify the grounds for their skepticism.

1. P-P partnership as management reform. Partnerships, in this instance, are severed from their historical roots in community voluntarism and urban economic development and linked instead to the privatization movement’s quest for efficiency gains. Accordingly, neither of these other roots will be explicitly treated here. (In fact, the link to voluntarism in the United States is quite complex; it typically evokes either traditionally conservative service obligations on the Right, e.g., the Junior League, or progressive ideals of citizen activism, e.g., Volunteers in Service to America, and not-for-profit community projects on the Left.) Nevertheless, as a management reform, partnerships are promoted as an innovative tool that will change the way government functions, largely by tapping into the discipline of the market. To do this, managers of government programs must formally enlist the collaboration of profit-seeking firms that (presumably) already enjoy the benefits of such discipline.

The collaboration, however, resembles more of a mentoring relationship than a joint undertaking. The flow of know-how appears asymmetric. Government managers are expected to become more like their business counterparts, than vice versa. This implies that business managers, at some earlier time, were reformed themselves, perhaps chastened by the fires of free-market competition or educated by management consultants in the ways of cost-efficiency and quality improvement. Government managers, in contrast, are taken to have grown flabby without competitive pressures and to be mired in the inefficiencies of red tape and bureaucratic organization. Such overstatement is typical of the rhetoric of the Reason Foundation, Coopers and Lybrand, or the Canadian Center for Management Development (Apel et al., 1994; Rodal & Wright, 1997; Gratias &
Boyd, 1995). The conduct of the promotion itself follows the regimen of the management consultancy. The National Council for Public-Private Partnerships (1997) in the United States and the Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships (1996) both have official government sanction (the former displays President Clinton's photograph in its materials). There are networks of prospects awaiting partners, databases of experienced exemplars, corporate underwriters, fee-for-service consultations, a speakers bureau, workshops, conventions, and of course, membership fees.

The imperatives for transforming government agencies to resemble profit-seeking businesses come from the hard lessons learned by firms that had their profits squeezed by more intensive competition, rapidly changing markets, and more demanding customers. The core presumption is that the skills needed to find new markets, enhance productivity, and stay ahead of the competition can also improve the way government works. Partnerships are viewed as the best vehicle for accomplishing this. Government managers learn by emulating their partners, as they adapt to the rigors of competition. If successful, they will become more entrepreneurial and flexible, occupied with deal making and attracting capital rather than with administrative procedure. The premises of this construction are prototypically neoliberal. The market stands as the superior source of production and service efficiencies, and its competitive character stimulates innovation and creative problem solving. Rather than divesting government altogether, however, its culture and operations can be changed with the right kind of intervention. Partnership, as management reform, is meant to serve this purpose.

2. P-P partnership as problem conversion. A variation on the management reform, partnerships are viewed from this perspective, not as a tool for changing managerial practices, but rather as a universal fix for most problems attending public service delivery. The task for government managers shifts from getting their own practices in line with entrepreneurial mores to reframing the problems they face in a way that will attract profit-seeking collaborators. In other words, commercialize problems to bait the marketplace. Here, the manager's duty is not to reform herself or himself but to induce others, wise to the ways of the market, to perform government's tasks for less money. The intent of the United Nations Development Program for the Urban Environment (1996), for example, is to accelerate private sector involvement by creating business opportunities out of gaps in infrastructure. Private firms bring their know-how and their capital. Government eases the regulatory and tax burdens and may add funds. The public gets its roads and water treatment. What distinguishes this venture from the machine politics of a century ago, in part at least, is the promoter's apparent obliviousness to the temptations of kickbacks and patronage. Will prospective partners be judged on noncommercial grounds? Where there is substantial money to be made, commercializing public problems can raise special
difficulties with oversight. The other major difference comes from the partnering mechanism replacing the standard procurement-by-contract with some kind of joint-investment arrangement.

This commercialization idea bears some resemblance to the European Union’s effort to attract private capital for a TransEuropean road network (Kinnock, 1998). The distinction between them becomes obvious only at the level of their premises. The European Union wants to supplement public funds to add projects that would otherwise not be affordable; it plans to take on partners, as it needs them, either for their expertise or for their capital. Nonetheless, government managers remain in charge. There is no effort to alter their public service ethic, or to change the way they manage. Instead, there is official sanction given for opportunistic partnerships as a supplemental tool for the financial management of complex, large-scale projects. In contrast, the United Nations depicts partnerships as the principal means of obtaining sustainable development in urban areas. Sustainability, in this context, appears to coincide with commercial viability; one must attract enough businesses that are not only willing to stay put, but able to shoulder the costs of infrastructure development largely on their own. Here, the government manager assumes the role of investment broker, putting deals together and attracting entrepreneurs and private capital to cooperative ventures on a project-by-project basis. Again, neoliberalism inspires confidence in the capital markets and enthusiastically propels the government manager beyond the bounds of contracting for services and into the promotion of private business growth and equity-based commercial transactions.

3. P-P partnership as moral regeneration. Each of the foregoing usages depicts partnership as a vehicle for bringing government closer to the market, either as a deal maker or as a pseudoentrepreneur. In both instances, competitive market exchanges appear as a model deserving emulation. The neoliberal’s faith in the superiority of market-mediated relations helps reinforce whatever other influences are at work driving government to embrace market incentives. Similarly, it takes a neoliberal’s sense of agency, holding that change for the better can be engineered through properly organized efforts, to inspire the confidence in partnership arrangements displayed here. Neoconservatives, in contrast, are more likely to view partnerships as a middle ground between public and private, rather than as a comprehensive tool for remaking government in the market’s image.

A more subtle distinction becomes apparent when we consider the effects that partnerships are intended to have on the people involved. Performance aside, there are certain features of government provision that convey official sanction, desert, entitlement, or worth that are largely absent from anonymous market exchanges, mediated by money rather than eligibility. In rejecting government for some forms of the public’s business, the neoliberal is implicitly also taking exception to the noncommercial differentiations that government programs rely upon. These are thought to have a corrosive influence on those
served, as well as on those doing the serving. Of course, the opportunity costs of (unreformed) government programs and their tax implications are always a prominent concern. And yet, consider the efforts of the Clinton Administration to link welfare to work. Without work, the argument goes, welfare cultivates dependency and, at the same time, generates bureaucratic waste. Part of the impetus behind welfare reform can be found behind management reform. Commercial bases for doing the public’s business are less fraught with moral judgments and are thus less corrosive to the human spirit. Hence, getting government managers involved as market participants, say through partnering arrangements, should have a salutary moral effect on them as well.

Taking this a step further, it is not just the relief of moving away from the effects of government service programs that matters to the neoliberal, it is the movement toward market-inspired traits of character. Self-reliance, initiative, hard work, integrity, prudence, and so on, all of which are familiar from Weber’s characterization of the protestant ethic, are all thought to accompany participation in property holding and commercial enterprise. When Prime Minister Thatcher denationalized British utilities, shares were sold below par value with the intent of giving as many people as possible a chance for ownership. The idea was not to liberalize the industries (the regulatory regime remained in place), but to give the public a direct stake in an important national enterprise (and to raise some cash) (Starr, 1988). Like property ownership, partnerships accomplish this moral purpose in a way that direct privatization would not have. Government managers are drawn into entrepreneurial activities via partnerships that strengthen their characters and stimulate their creative problem-solving skills.

The interesting irony here is that although neoconservatives promote virtue and wish to nurture the institutions that do so, neoliberals are the ones who find virtues in the market. Character is built through self-initiative and entrepreneurship, that is, through market experience. The place of other institutions is less central. For the neoconservative, on the other hand, the market offers expression to certain values but cannot be their principal source.

For the three usages that follow, the tone and perspective shifts subtly. In place of the neoliberal’s commitment to the market as the wellspring of social order, we have the neoconservative’s more reserved endorsement of market incentives as a partial means of devolving and decentralizing public sector responsibilities.

4. *P-P partnership as risk shifting.* The usage here portrays partnering as a means of responding to fiscal stringency on the part of the government. The program’s advocates are typically speaking from official positions within government and express concerns about leveraging public capital for infrastructure and other capital-intensive projects. From the government’s perspective, the partnership arrangements are a means of getting private interests to sign on, and they promise profit potential for doing so. The British Treasury’s Private Finance Initiative (1997) encourages government managers to refashion property-rights
assignments to attract private capital to shoulder start-up costs. Through special lease-purchase arrangements, private investors assume the financial risks of ownership, once the projects are complete. The rhetoric in this instance is similar to that coming out of the European Union, as mentioned earlier. It follows the logic of load shedding but stops short of full privatization. In effect, government is exhorted to do more with less.

This usage fits squarely in neither one ideological camp nor the other, because we also find this kind of thinking in the New Deal liberal's support for funneling public money directly to cities for redevelopment partnerships with local developers and business interests. In the latter case, it represents a pragmatic coalitional strategy for ensuring sufficient support for these projects in business-dominated jurisdictions. In more colorful terms, it promises enough pork to go around. The neoconservative's construction, however, puts business on the check-writing side. When partnering works the way it is supposed to, business partners help bring fiscal restraint to these projects and insure their financial viability. Certainly, reinforcing the support that business traditionally offers conservative parties may play a role in the push for partnering. Nevertheless, the idea of heightened vigilance over public investments squares with the neoconservative's efforts more generally to restrain government spending, especially for service programs, and to scale back its service commitments.

On the surface, there are obvious parallels between risk shifting and problem conversion, both of which are depicted here as separate meanings assigned to partnership. The two meanings appear to differ more in degree than in kind; risk shifting might be seen as a prelude to more elaborate efforts to transform a public problem wholly into a private one. Nonetheless, as our deconstruction shows, their ideological premises differ. The rhetoric of problem conversion valorizes commercial activity and market discipline, placing government in a supporting, subordinate role. In contrast, risk shifting assigns the supporting role, not to government, but to commercial interests. Furthermore, the exhortation is for business to join in cooperative ventures of some sort to leverage government's resources, not displace them. The purposes remain public, even though the resources are eventually mixed.

5. P-P partnership as restructuring public service. Part of the neoconservative's objection to government reflects concerns about its growth. Recent thinking about the engines of this growth continues to owe a debt to Lowi (1979) for singling out interest-group liberalism as the culprit. In his scenario, government agencies are set upon by legions of interests demanding money and services. The agencies respond, having been given (in error) the discretion and authority to do so. The regrettable result is government out of control, overburdened and overextended. The two putative solutions are to take the discretion away (Lowi's) or to devolve the responsibilities to other levels of government more used to saying no. Several decades later, we have two unintended consequences of these fixes. First, the administrative procedures intended to structure
agencies' discretion have restricted their ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Second, those local agencies, expected to say no, have been less able to cope with demands from the inside. Public sector employees in the United States have unionized in record numbers. Partnerships can address both.

In theory, partnerships can not only relieve projects of some of the weight of administrative procedures, at least on the private partners' side, they can also move from a public to a private workforce, one that is disciplined by the labor market. In conventional labor-management relations, the management's efforts to shift work outside a unionized plant to nonunion employees (also called outsourcing) is reason enough to strike. For public employees who are typically prohibited from striking in the United States, the recourse is less clear. Partnerships can serve as a means for effectively deregulating employment relations through the substitution of unorganized workers (Supiot, 1996). The approach of labor and liberal governments might well be the reverse. Partnerships could also be used to control labor standards via formal agreements on wages, as well as noncommercial features, such as gender and racial discrimination. This has been a recent trend in international trade agreements and contracting in some large cities. In this case, partnerships appear to provide a vehicle that can move in either direction.

6. P-P partnership as power sharing. Although privatization has been promoted by some as empowerment because it devolves control vertically downward toward the consumer, partnerships, according to this sixth usage, spread control horizontally, especially in regulatory matters where control has been concentrated in the government. Partnerships as power sharing can alter business-government relations in fundamental ways. First, an ethos of cooperation and trust replaces the adversarial relations endemic to command-and-control regulation (Ghere, 1996). Second, any relationship between partners will involve some mutually beneficial sharing of responsibility, knowledge, or risk. In most instances, each party brings something of value to the others to be invested or exchanged. Third, there is an expectation of give-and-take between the partners, negotiating differences that were otherwise litigated. For the neoconservative, power sharing can take the teeth out of regulation, making it less rigid, punitive, and arbitrary. Although the neoconservatives are not opposed to the government using force and coercion to preserve order, using coercion to force firms to change the way they make their business decisions is objectionable. The neoliberal typically goes further and supports commercialization of environmental problems, as opposed to the liberalization of compliance schedules and control requirements.

What kinds of control are shared in practice is another matter. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA; 1998a, 1998b) operates extensive partnership programs for each of its major areas of responsibility. Some are promotions to provide technical assistance for recycling or waste disposal on a voluntary basis. Others enlist firms in programs that promise reductions in reporting and
control requirements for those willing to demonstrate higher abatement levels and share their control strategies with their competitors. The market lure is cost savings, technical assistance, and flexibility in monitoring and enforcement. The agency, on the other hand, gains an opportunity for intensive social marketing, roughly analogous to the Salvation Army's exchange of soup for sermons. Here, the partnership falls under the rubric of reengineering government, stimulating innovation and cost savings. Nevertheless, regulatory control in EPA's case seems to be parceled out very sparsely and only to trusted firms. This seems to have little to do with the neoconservative's preference for loosening regulatory controls. As with the usage of partnerships as restructuring public sector employment, the power sharing idea can harbor a liberal's intent behind its neoconservative face.

TWO REMAINDERS

The grammar of meanings that has structured my treatment of partnerships assumes six distinct, but sometimes overlapping, ways of understanding and talking about partnering. Each of these six ways, in turn, depends upon a set of normative premises that have been linked to one of two major neo ideologies. Although many more ideologies are influential in the industrialized West, these two continue to play a central role in provoking and inspiring the reform of the welfare state before the century's end. There are, however, two significant remainders—meanings excluded from our grammar. Both entail very different takes on partnering. One connects it with traditional modes of not-for-profit collaboration, and the other treats it as simply a new face on conventional forms of privatization. A brief consideration of these remainders follows.

The grammar of partnerships fashioned in previous sections has purposely excluded the variety of day-to-day, public-spirited partnerships that have gone on in various localities for years, often with progressive intent. Partnerships among nonprofit organizations, schools, churches, and civic organizations, for example, often fill gaps in the social service safety net left by fiscal austerity and neoliberal thinking about government. Not-for-profit service organizations may partner with advocacy groups and local government to serve the needs of certain neighborhoods or vulnerable groups. Money may be raised locally, contributed by fund-raising organizations, such as the United Way, or charitable foundations; in the United States, this is indirectly subsidized by the tax code. These classes of service partnerships deserve their own deconstructive treatment for several reasons.

First, unlike the P-P partnerships discussed above, these public-public or private-private partnerships may have historical roots in their communities that extend across generations. In effect, they are woven into the fabric of civic life and may not easily be distinguished from the communities that they serve. Second, the ideologies that they are premised upon represent very different
traditions in public thinking from the ones treated here. The rhetoric of these partnerships is typically a moral one tied to meeting communal needs. Finally, the absence of profit motives among the participants changes the dynamics of the partnership itself—who participates and why—as well as the bases of cooperation.

Among these local institutions, rights-based liberalism or communitarian notions direct objectives away from commercial interests and profit seeking, and toward service ideals and civic responsibilities. Traditional conservatism may play a role in directing aims, as in some organizations based on religious affiliation or upper-class voluntarism. From across the ideological spectrum, social democratic ideology may appear in grassroots organizations, partnering in coalitions to oppose for-profit corporate projects or practices. In either instance, opposition to a legitimate government presence or advocacy of market solutions—the core of our neo ideologies—play a negligible role.

The second remainder omitted from our grammar consists of those treatments that construct partnerships as a rubric to cover most ongoing forms of privatization. Here, the term seems to function as a euphemism for privatizing the functions of government without assailing its legitimacy. Attention to partnerships between government and for-profit firms, in North America at least, has intensified over the last decade, on the heels of the privatization campaigns of the 1980s. The central messages of these campaigns, their open animosity toward government and strident assurances of superior service and no waste, have been tempered somewhat in the promotional literature that disguises privatization as partnering. Hence, partnering appears as privatization's logical successor, but a more refined and domesticated version, perhaps one better adapted to the less doctrinaire 1990s. Partnerships in this genre seem to offer a more palatable, less prickly, form of packaging around the contents of a government's shifting functions to commercial enterprises.

The more circumspect academic pieces that attempt to assess the performance of contemporary partnerships as a policy tool can easily be caught up in this symbolic succession. Accordingly, partnering, in this literature, is distinct from privatization in name only. Further, what passes for partnerships, because of the term's connotation of cooperativeness and its reformist cachet, can extend from indirect subsidies to traditional procurement contracting. Lost to these treatments is the basic idea that partnering, in some of its guises, can represent a fundamental departure in the post-Cold War relationship between public and private sectors. This idea is the premise behind the grammar of multiple meanings presented here.

REFERENCES


