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Organizing Identity: Entrepreneurial Governance and Public Management

Paul du Gay

These days it seems increasingly difficult to get away from 'culture'. Within the academy, for example, the theme of 'culture' has come to dominate debates in the social and human sciences. At the same time the substantive concerns of other spheres of existence have come to be represented in 'cultural' terms. In the domain of formal politics in the UK during the 1980s the ruling Conservative Party's radical programme of reform was represented in large part as a 'cultural' crusade, concerned with the attitudes, values and forms of self-understanding embedded in both individual and institutional activities. In other words, the government's political project of reconstruction was defined as one of cultural reconstruction – as an attempt to transform Britain into an 'Enterprise Culture'.

To my mind, one of the most interesting – indeed remarkable – instances of the contemporary turn to culture has occurred within the field of prescriptive organizational discourse. In recent years, people working in large organizations are very likely to have found themselves exposed to 'culture change' programmes as part of attempts to make enterprises more efficient, effective and profitable. Even in the most ostensibly 'material' of domains – that of business and organization – programmes of reform have come to be defined in cultural terms.

A cursory inspection of any number of recent management texts reveals the primacy accorded to 'culture' in governing contemporary organizational life. In this literature 'culture' is accorded a privileged position because it is seen to structure the way people think, feel and act in organizations. The problem is one of changing 'norms', 'attitudes' and 'values' so that people are enabled to make the right and necessary contribution to the success of the organization for which they work. To this end, managers are encouraged to view the most effective or 'excellent' organizations as those with the appropriate 'culture' – that ensemble of norms and techniques of conduct that enables the self-actualizing capacities of individuals to become aligned with the goals and objectives of the organization for which they work.
This focus on ‘culture’ as a means of producing a particular relationship to self amongst members of an enterprise suggests that its deployment as a governmental technique is intimately bound up with questions of identity. As Renato Rosaldo (1993: xi) has suggested, it is a pronounced feature of the present that ‘questions of culture . . . quite quickly become . . . questions of identity’ and developments in the organizational context seem to bear this out.

According to the popular management guru Tom Peters (1992: 227), contemporary attempts to govern the ‘culture’ of an organization have major implications for the sorts of identities that can flourish within an enterprise. He argues that ‘emerging organizational forms’ will turn every employee into a ‘businessperson’ or ‘entrepreneur’. That is, contemporary organizational reform accords ontological priority to a particular category of person – the ‘businessperson’ or ‘entrepreneur’ – providing this menschlichen Typus with, in the words of Max Hennis (quoted in Hennis, 1988: 59), ‘the optimal chances of becoming the dominant type’.

In this chapter, I focus upon the new norms and techniques of conduct – or ‘culture’ – being instituted within organizations and the priority they accord to the ‘entrepreneur’ as a category of person. More specifically, I enquire into the political and ethical effects of re-imaging public sector bureaucrats as ‘entrepreneurs’, paying particular attention as to whether such a move is sufficiently pluralist (presupposing as it does a single ethical hierarchy with the entrepreneur at its apex).

Exploring the ethos of enterprise

In January, 1994 the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the House of Commons in the UK issued an unprecedented report entitled The Proper Conduct of Public Business. The report was published in the wake of a number of well publicized failures in ‘administrative and financial systems and controls’ within government departments and other public bodies which had led to ‘money being wasted or otherwise improperly spent’ (1994: v). According to the committee, these failings represented a significant departure from the standards of public conduct expected in liberal democratic societies in general and the UK in particular.

Along with many sections of the British press (Financial Times, 28 January: 17; Guardian, 28 January: 1 & 6; 29 January: 20; Independent, 28 January: 1) the Public Accounts Committee indicated that these failings had occurred at the same time as the introduction of more market-oriented and entrepreneurial systems of organization within the public sector. They also agreed that the two developments were related in some way. However, unlike some sections of the press, the Public Accounts Committee allotted no credence to the possibility that the ‘cultural revolution’ taking place within the public sector actively encouraged conduct amongst public servants that might be interpreted as ‘improper’. Indeed, those who queried the politico-ethical propriety of the current reforms received short shrift. They were castigated for not wanting ‘to accept the challenge of securing beneficial change’ (1994: v).

This language of ‘change’ – invariably the sort that challenges – is a constitutive element of contemporary managerial discourse. It forms part of a discursive chain of equivalences that includes inter alia ‘enterprise’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘customer’. This discourse is, of course, relational in character – its constitutive elements only get to mean what they do in relation to that which they are not. For example, the norms and values of conduct inscribed within contemporary managerial discourse are articulated in explicit opposition to those constituting the identity of ‘bureaucratic’ organization. Whereas the bureaucratic ethos encourages the development of particular capacities and predispositions amongst its subjects – strict adherence to procedure, the abnegation of personal moral enthusiasm and so forth – contemporary managerial discourse stresses the importance of individuals acquiring and exhibiting more ‘proactive’ and ‘entrepreneurial’ traits and virtues.

That the Public Accounts Committee report speaks from within the universe of contemporary managerialism can be in little doubt. In the report the managerial ethos with its ‘greater delegation of responsibilities, streamlining, and . . . more entrepreneurial approach’ is favourably compared to the traditional bureaucratic ‘ethos of office’ – the latter being uniformly associated with waste, inertia and unnecessary regulation (1994: v–vi).

As I have indicated, however, while expressing a belief in the public benefits of contemporary organizational change the report bemoans the diminution of ‘principles and standards’ of conduct expected of public officials in liberal democracies (1994: v). That these ‘principles and standards’ have arisen and have been fostered largely within a bureaucratic context does not seem to be relevant. Instead, the committee appears to assume that organizational reforms designed to make public organizations less bureaucratic and more entrepreneurial are uniformly positive; that they will increase economic efficiency – providing improved services at reduced cost – without affecting ‘traditional public sector values’. This can easily be interpreted as something of a leap of faith, however, if not an out and out non sequitur.

For one thing, assuming that the identity of a domain remains the same throughout all the changes it undergoes is extremely problematic. As I have already argued, given that any identity is basically relational in terms of its conditions of existence, any change in the latter is bound to affect the former. If, for example, the (bureaucratic) conduct of public administration is re-imagined in terms of entrepreneurial principles, then rather than having the same identity – (bureaucratic) public administration – in a new situation, a new identity is established.

Moreover, the production of this new identity will inevitably involve
trade-offs. Rather than assuming, as the PAC report seems to do, that entrepreneurial public management is incontrovertibly a ‘good thing’ – that it is inherently positive – it might be more productive to examine its conditions of emergence, to analyse what its establishment must inevitably exclude and to assess what the politico-ethical effects of this exclusion might be.

Entrepreneurial governance and the critique of bureaucratic culture

The case against bureaucracy and for the sorts of ‘flexible’, ‘entrepreneurial’ forms and practices envisioned in contemporary discourses of organizational reform begins with changes in what is termed ‘the external environment’. The conditions of existence of this discursive formation – the dislocatory effects consequent upon the increasing deployment of ‘information technology’; those associated with the competitive pressures resulting from global systems of trade, finance and production, etc. – they all agree that the intensification of patterns of global interconnectedness has serious repercussions for the conduct of organizational life, in both the public and private sectors.

If ‘globalization’ constitutes the key ‘predicament’, then ‘bureaucracy’ is positioned as the crucial impediment to the successful management of its effects. Globalization, it is argued, creates an environment characterized by massive uncertainty. In such an environment only those organizations that can rapidly change their conduct and learn to become ever more enterprising will survive and prosper. Because ‘bureaucracy’ is held to be a ‘mechanistic’ form of organization best suited to conditions of relative stability and predictability, it becomes the first casualty of such an uncertain environment.

In this environment, bureaucratic institutions ... – public and private – increasingly fail us. Today’s environment demands institutions that are extremely flexible and adaptable. It demands institutions that deliver high-quality goods and services, squeezing ever more bang out of every buck [sic]. It demands institutions that are responsive to their customers, offering choices of non-standardized services; that lead by persuasion and incentives rather than commands; that give their employees a sense of meaning and control, even ownership. It demands institutions that empower citizens rather than simply serving them. (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992: 15).

The dislocatory effects generated by the intensification of patterns of global interconnectedness require constant ‘creativity’ and the continuous construction of collective operational spaces that rest less upon mechanistic objective forms and their related practices – ‘bureaucracy’ – and increasingly upon the development of more entrepreneurial organizational forms and modes of conduct.

The notion of ‘enterprise’ occupies an absolutely crucial position in contemporary discourses of organizational reform. It provides a critique of ‘bureaucratic culture’ and offers itself as a solution to the problems posed by ‘globalization’ through delineating the principles of a new method of governing organizational and personal conduct.

Quite obviously one key feature of ‘enterprise’ as a principle of government is the central role it allocates to the ‘commercial enterprise’ as the preferred model for any form of institutional organization of goods and services. However, of equal importance is the way in which the term refers to the habits of action that display or express ‘enterprising qualities or the part of those concerned’, whether they be individuals or collectivities. Here, ‘enterprise’ refers to a plethora of characteristics such as initiative, risk-taking, self-reliance, and the ability to accept responsibility for oneself and one’s actions (Keat, 1990:3).

Thus, as Burchell (1993: 275) has noted, the defining characteristic of entrepreneurial governance is the ‘generalization of an “enterprise form” to all forms of conduct – to the conduct of organizations hitherto seen as being non-economic, to the conduct of government, and to the conduct of individuals themselves’. While the concrete ways in which this governmental rationality has been operationalized have varied quite considerably, the forms of action they make possible for different institutions and persons – schools, general practitioners, housing estates, prisons and so forth – do share a general consistency and style.

As Burchell (1993: 276, following Donzelot) has argued, a characteristic feature of this style of government is the fundamental role it accords to ‘contract’ in redefining social relations. The changes affecting schools, hospitals, government departments and so forth often involve the reconstituting of institutional roles in terms of contracts strictly defined, and even more frequently involve a contract-like way of representing relationships between institutions and between individuals and institutions (Friedland, 1994: 88). An example of the former, for instance, occurs when fund-holding medical practices contract with hospital trusts for the provision of health care to particular patients where previously that provision was made directly by the National Health Service. Examples of the latter include the relationships between central government departments and the new executive or Next Steps agencies – where no technical contract as such exists but where the relationship between the two is governed by a contract-like ‘Framework Document’ which defines the functions and goals of the agency, and the procedures whereby the department will set and monitor the performance targets for the agency.

Thus, ‘contractualization’ typically consists of assigning the performance of a function or an activity to a distinct unit of management—individual or collective—which is regarded as being accountable for the efficient performance of that function or conduct of that activity. By
assuming active responsibility for these activities and functions – both for carrying them out and for their outcomes – these units of management are in effect affirming a certain kind of identity or personality. This is essentially entrepreneurial in character. Contractualization requires these units of management to adopt a certain entrepreneurial form of relationship to themselves 'as a condition of their effectiveness and of the effectiveness of this form of government' (Burchell, 1993:276). Or, to put it in the language of Tom Peters (1992:273), contractualization 'businesses' individuals and collectivities.

As Colin Gordon (1991:42-5) has argued, entrepreneurial forms of governance such as contractualization involve the re-imagination of the social as a form of the economic. 'This operation works,' he argues, 'by the progressive enlargement of the territory of economic theory by a series of redefinitions of its object.'

Economics thus becomes an 'approach' capable in principle of addressing the totality of human behaviour, and, consequently, of envisaging a coherent purely economic method of programming the totality of governmental action. (Gordon, 1991:43)

The levelling function that this process performs ensures that formerly diverse institutions, practices, goods and so forth become subject to judgement and calculation exclusively in terms of economic criteria – giving rise to the increasing dominance of what Lyotard (1984:46) terms 'the performative principle'. However, it would be misguided to view this development as simply the latest and purest manifestation of the irresistible rise of *homo economicus*.

As Gordon (1991:43) has indicated, the subject of 'enterprise' is both a 'reactivation and a radical inversion' of traditional 'economic man'. The reactivation consists in positing a fundamental human faculty of *choice*, a principle which empowers economic calculation effectively to sweep aside the anthropological categories and frameworks of the human and social sciences. The great innovation occurs, however, in the conceptualization of the economic agent as an inherently manipulable creation. Whereas, *homo economicus* was originally conceived of as a subject the wellspring of whose activity were ultimately 'unattacable by government', the subject of enterprise is imagined as an agent 'who is perpetually responsive to modifications in its environment'. As Gordon points out, 'economic government here joins hands with behaviourism' (ibid.). The resultant subject is in a novel sense not just an 'enterprise' but 'the entrepreneur of himself or herself'. In other words, entrepreneurial government 'makes up' the individual as a particular sort of person – as an 'entrepreneur of the self' (Gordon, 1987:300).

This idea of an individual human life as an 'enterprise of the self' suggests that no matter what hand circumstance may have dealt a person, he or she remains always continuously engaged (even if technically 'unemployed') in that one enterprise, and that it is 'part of the continuous business of living to make adequate provision for the preservation, reproduction and reconstruction of one's own human capital' (Gordon, 1991:44).

Because a human being is considered to be continuously engaged in a project to shape his or her life as an autonomous, choosing individual driven by the desire to optimize the worth of its own existence, life for that person is represented as a single, basically undifferentiated arena for the pursuit of that endeavour. Because previously distinct forms of life are now classified primarily if not exclusively as 'entrepreneur forms', the conceptions and practices of personhood they give rise to are remarkably consistent. As schools, prisons, government departments and so forth are re-imagined as 'enterprises' they all accord an increased priority to the 'entrepreneur' as a category of person. In this sense, the character of the entrepreneur can no longer be represented as just one amongst a plurality of ethical personalities but must be seen as assuming an ontological priority.

This conception of the individual as an 'entrepreneur of the self' is firmly established at the heart of contemporary programmes of organizational reform. In keeping with the entrepreneurial imbrication of economics and behaviourism, contemporary programmes of organizational reform characterize employment not as a painful obligation imposed upon individuals, nor as an activity undertaken to meet purely instrumental needs, but rather as a means to self-development. Organizational success is therefore premised upon an engagement by the organization of the self-optimizing impulses of all its members, no matter what their formal role. This ambition is to be made practicable in the workplace through a variety of techniques such as 'delayering' and performance-related pay. The latter, whose deployment throughout the public sector has grown dramatically in the last decade, often involves the development of an ongoing 'contract' between an individual employee and their line manager whereby an employee's pay is made more dependent upon whether or he has met or exceeded certain performance objectives (Millward et al, 1992:268, 361; Marsden and Richardson, 1994).

Thus, performance management and related techniques entail a characteristically 'contractual' relationship between individual employees and the organization for which they work. This means 'offering' individuals involvement in activities – such as managing budgets, training staff, delivering services – previously held to be the responsibility of other agents such as supervisors or personnel departments. However, the price of this involvement is that individuals themselves must assume responsibility for carrying out these activities and for their outcomes. In keeping with the constitutive principles of enterprise as a rationality of government performance, management and related techniques function as forms of 'responsibilization' which are held to be both economically desirable and personally 'empowering'.

Entrepreneurial organizational governance therefore entails the reconstruction of a wide range of institutions and activities along the lines of the
commercial firm. At the same time, guaranteeing that the optimum benefits accrue from the restructurinng of organizations along market lines necessitates the production of particular forms of conduct by all members of an organization. In this sense, governing organizational life in an enterprising manner involves 'making up' new ways for people to be; it refers to the importance of individuals acquiring and exhibiting specific 'enterprising capacities and dispositions.

Reflected through the gaze of enterprise, 'bureaucratic culture' appears inimical to the development of these 'virtues' and hence to the production of enterprising persons. The bureaucratic commitment to norms of impersonality, strict adherence to procedure and the acceptance of hierarchical sub- and super-ordination is seen as antithetical to the cultivation of those entrepreneurial skills and sensibilities which alone can guarantee a 'manageable' and hence sustainable future.

While proponents of entrepreneurial governance are not averse to admitting that bureaucratic norms and techniques have proved efficient and effective in certain circumstances they clearly believe that such circumstances are no longer to be found, nor are they likely to recur in the foreseeable future. The implication is that organizational survival and flourishing in the dislocated environments of the present requires the cultivation of an appropriate entrepreneurial competence and style through which at one and the same time organizations conduct their business and persons conduct themselves within those organizations.

As I argued earlier, because the discourse of enterprise presupposes that no organizational context is immune to the effects of 'globalization', it assumes that ostensibly different organizations - hospitals, charities, banks, government departments - will have to develop similar norms and techniques of conduct, for without so doing they will lack the capacity to pursue their preferred projects. The urgency with which such claims are deployed gives the very definite impression that 'There Is No Alternative'. As Kanter (1990: 356) forcefully declares, organizations 'must either move away from bureaucratic guarantees to post-entrepreneurial flexibility or... stagnate - thereby cancelling by default any commitments they have made'.

While such insistent singularity has obvious attractions - for one thing it offers the sort of easily graspable and communicable Weltanschauung that can act as a catalyst for change - it neglects the fact that the generalization of an enterprise form to all forms of conduct may of itself serve to incapacitate an organization's ability to pursue its preferred projects by redefining its identity and hence what the nature of its project actually is.

In the public sector, which is part of government and which should therefore be subject to the rule of law, organizations are concerned with such things as equity and treating like cases in a like manner. These are not values primarily served by commercial enterprises and there is no prima facie reason why they should be. However, they are central to government and the rule of law in liberal democratic regimes. There is a clear danger here that the introduction of entrepreneurial principles into public sector organizations might undermine these basic principles of public provision and this serves to highlight the fact that in liberal democratic societies there is a good reason for assuming that markets have political and moral limits and that 'plotting some of the boundaries of markets will also involve putting enterprise in its legitimate place' (Plant, 1992: 66).

The entrepreneurialist may reply that without 'enterprising up' public sector organizations the liberties and equalities that citizens take for granted might become unaffordable, but this argument once again assumes that the generalization of an enterprise form to the conduct of public administration, for example, will not affect the identity and integrity of public administration but will simply make it 'work better'. Yet, in relation to the report of the Public Accounts Committee, it is extremely problematic to assume that the identity of a domain of activity can remain the same when its basic organizing principles are fundamentally altered.

Instead of simply accepting the case that the contemporary 'enterprising up' of the public sector is a uniformly positive as well as inherently necessary development I seek to advance the unfashionable view that there are a number of important political and ethical reasons for representing bureaucracy as the most efficient and effective form of public sector organization. In putting forward arguments to support this position I begin by specifying what the bureaucratic ethos consists of, indicating what sort of conceptions and practices of personhood the bureau gives rise to and delineating the relationship between these and what Michael Walzer (1984) terms 'the liberal art of separation'.

Office as a vocation

The idea that public sector organizations need reform has achieved a somewhat axiomatic status. To what extent and in what directions remains a matter of considerable debate. In recent years one particular approach has become pre- eminent and it is this approach that underpins many of the public sector reforms now taking place across the 'advanced' economies.

This new modus operandi is often termed the 'New Public Management', and more recently 'entrepreneurial governance'. According to two of its most fashionable proponents - Osborne and Gaebler (1992: 19-20) - 'entrepreneurial governance' consists of ten 'essential principles' which link together to 'reinvent' the public sector:

entrepreneurial governments promote competition between service providers. They empower citizens by pushing control out of the bureaucracy, into the community. They measure the performance of their agencies, focusing not on
cannot even conceive of such a question. They seem unable to represent ‘bureaucracy’ in anything other than negative terms. Inciting readers to develop a ‘public and passionate hatred of bureaucracy’ (Peters, 1987:459) leaves little room for any positive evaluation of bureaucratic conduct. Indeed, texts such as those by Osborne and Gaebler (1992) and Peters (1987, 1992) tell their readers very little about the technical, ethical or social organization of the bureau, full stop. Instead their main role appears to be to frame the difference between the vocational ethics of the bureaucrat and those of the entrepreneur from the perspective of entrepreneurial principles. Rather than describing the ethos of office the entrepreneurial critique seeks to assess bureaucracy in terms of its failure to realize objectives which enterprise alone has set for it.

Delineating the bureaucratic ethos

According to the advocates of entrepreneurial government, bureaucracy is both economically and morally bankrupt. They argue that bureaucratic organization is always likely to mean significant human, and hence financial, cost because the privilege it accords to ‘instrumental rationality’ involves the simultaneous repression and marginalization of its Other – the personal, the emotional and so forth.

In the traditional bureaucratic corporation, roles were so circumscribed that most relationships tended to be rather formal and impersonal. Narrowly defined jobs constructed by rules and procedures also tended to stifle initiative and creativity, and the atmosphere was emotionally repressive. (Kanter, 1990:280)

In this reading, bureaucratic organization is based upon a series of ‘foundational’ exclusions whose ‘absent presence’ erupts onto the organizational surface in the form of cumulatively disabling ‘dysfunctions’. To back up this claim, advocates of entrepreneurial government continually point to, amongst other things, a perceived lack of commitment, motivation and identification amongst the bureaucratic workforce which they attribute directly to ‘rationalist’ systems ‘that seem calculated to tear down their workers’ self-image’ (Peters and Waterman, 1982:57).

Inefficiency, waste and inertia are directly related to the fact that bureaucratic organization does not function as an instrument of ‘self-optimization’ for its members. Instead its very ‘essence’ is seen to be based upon a separation of ‘reason and emotion’ and ‘pleasure and duty’, which is disastrous for the productive health of the nation, the organization and the moral and emotional character of the individual employee.

Although the entrepreneurial critique utilizes (highly) selective elements of the work of the premier theorist of bureaucratic culture, Max Weber, in making its case – particularly those passages where bureaucratization is seen as equivalent to a general process of disenchanted and
dehumanization: the infamous ‘iron cage of bureaucracy’ – their conclusions concerning the ethical defects of bureaucracy are in fact quite the opposite to those expressed by Weber.

In his classic account of bureaucratic culture Weber (1968) refuses to treat the impersonal, expert, procedural and hierarchical character of bureaucratic reason and action as inefficient and morally bankrupt. Instead, he makes it quite clear that the bureau consists in a particular ethos or what he terms Lebensführung – not only an ensemble of purposes and ideals within a given code of conduct but also ways and means of conducting oneself within a given ‘life-order’. He insists that the bureau must be assessed in its own right as a particular moral institution and that the ethical attributes of the bureau must be viewed as the contingent and often fragile achievements of that socially organized sphere of moral existence.

According to Weber, the bureau comprises the social conditions of a distinctive and independent organization of the person. Among the most important of these conditions are, that access to office is dependent upon lengthy training in a technical expertise, usually certified by public examination; and that the office itself constitutes a ‘vocation’, a focus of ethical commitment and duty, autonomous of and superior to the bureau’s extra-official ties to class, kin or conscience. In Weber’s discussion of bureaucracy these conditions delineate the bureau as a particular department of life, and they provide the bureaucrat with a distinctive ethical bearing and mode of conduct.

The ethical attributes of the good bureaucrat – strict adherence to procedure, acceptance of sub-and superordination, commitment to the purposes of the office – do not represent an incompetent subtraction from a ‘complete’ entrepreneurial conception of personhood. Rather, they should be viewed as a positive moral achievement in their own right. They represent the product of particular ethical techniques and practices through which individuals develop the disposition and ability to conduct themselves according to the ethos of bureaucratic office (Hunter, 1991; Minson, 1993).

Instead of lending support to the entrepreneurial stereotype of bureaucracy as inimical to self-realization, Weber points to the historical specificity of the ‘rational’ character of bureaucracy. Rather than representing the denial of personal involvement in, or the possibility of deriving personal pleasure from, the conduct of office, Weber’s (1968:359) stress on the ‘impersonal’, ‘functional’ and ‘objective’ nature of bureaucratic norms and techniques refers simply to the setting aside of pre-bureaucratic forms of patronage. What is to be excluded as ‘irrational’ by this form of conduct is not personal feelings per se, but a series of ‘private’ group prerogatives and interests which ‘governed as they were by a completely different ethos, it was at other times deemed quite legitimate and “reasonable” to pursue’ (Minson, 1991:15). The normative scope of bureaucratic rationality is quite particular. As Weber (1968:973)

remarks: ‘this freely creative administration would not constitute a realm of free arbitrary action and discretion, of personally motivated favour and valuation as we find among the pre-bureaucratic forms’.

Weber proceeds to indicate that bureaucratic rationality does not operate to exclude all sentiment from organizational existence. Such an accusation – levelled by the advocates of enterprise amongst many others – completely misses the point that bureaucratic culture engenders no antipathy towards emotional or personal relations within the domain of the office as long as these do not open the possibility of corruption through, for example, the improper use of patronage, indulging incompetence or through the betrayal of confidentiality. As Minson (1993:135) argues, ‘the supposition of an essential antipathy between bureaucracy and informal relations such as friendship hinges on a romantic identification of such relations with freedom from normative compulsion, spontaneous attraction, intimacy, and free choice’. When Weber describes bureaucratic conduct as precluding ‘personally motivated’ actions it is therefore important not to follow the advocates of enterprise and extend his intended reference from the exercise of personal patronage to the universal exclusion of the personal and/or ‘private’ realms.

In a similar move, Weber also indicates that far from being morally and emotionally vacuous ‘formally rational’ modes of conduct do have an ethical basis. As Charles Larmore, (1987:xii–xiv) has argued, Weber’s concept of ‘formal rationality’ has been consistently misappropriated and made to serve as a bearing he has never intended. It differs from its twin concept of ‘substantive rationality’ not by being narrowly ‘instrumental’ and dependent upon arbitrarily given ends – as the advocates of enterprise suggest – but by taking account of the heterogeneity of morality. In other words, while the ethos associated with formal rationality is certainly premised upon the cultivation of indifference to certain moral ends, that very indifference is predicated upon an awareness of the irreducible plurality of and frequent incommensurability between passionately held moral beliefs and thus on the possible moral costs of pursuing any one of them. Viewed within this frame, formal rationality is not associated with the development of an amoral instrumentalism but with the cultivation of a ‘liberal pluralist’ ‘ethics of responsibility’ which does take account of the consequences of attempting to realize essentially contestable values that frequently come into conflict with other values.

In this sense, the bureau represents an important ethical and political resource in liberal democratic regimes because it serves to divorce the administration of public life from private moral absolutisms. It has become, as Larmore (1987:41–2) indicates, ‘a condition of freedom’ because it permits ‘a significant and liberating separation of the public and the private’. Without the emergence of the ethical sphere and persona of the bureau and the bureaucrat, the construction of a buffer between civic virtues and personal principles – one of the constitutive principles of modern liberal democracy – would never have become
possible. As Michael Walzer (1984:320) argues, the ‘liberal art of separation’ that bureaucracy effects is a source of pluralism, equality and freedom:

Under the aegis of the art of separation, liberty and equality go together. Indeed, they invite a single definition: we can say that a (modern, complex, differentiated) society enjoys both freedom and equality when success in one institutional setting is not convertible into success in another, that is, when the separations hold.

Businessing bureaucracy: enterprise and public management

The ethos of office, with its chief point of honour, the capacity to set aside one's private political, moral, regional and other commitments, should not be regarded as obsolete. The question then remains: what effect is a shift to entrepreneurial forms of government likely to have upon this ethos?

The very identity of entrepreneurial government is constituted in opposition to bureaucratic culture. Advocates of enterprise tend to represent 'bureaucracy' in language which leaves no room for positive evaluation. However, it is only possible to begin to answer the question posed above by indicating the ways in which the norms and techniques of entrepreneurial governance might pose a threat to the bureaucratic 'art of separation'.

According to the philosopher Amélie Rorty (1988:7) the liberal art of separation is most often undermined when the concerns of one particular context of life-order are imposed on other different departments of existence. The discourse of enterprise is involved in just such a 'take-over' by seeking to render a variety of discrete ethical domains amenable to one method of government.

The defining feature of entrepreneurial government is the generalisation of an enterprise form to all forms of conduct - public, private, voluntary, etc. In this way, a certain conception of the person as an entrepreneur, which derives from and properly belongs to a particular sphere of existence (the life-order of the market) is imposed upon other departments of life (each of which has given rise to its own conceptions and practices of personhood). This blurs the boundaries between distinct spheres of existence and, I would suggest, the liberties and equalities predicated upon the 'art of separation' are put into question.

As Weber (1968: 1404) argued, the ethos governing the conduct of the 'bureaucrat', the 'entrepreneur' and the 'politician' are not identical. In addressing the different kinds of responsibility that these 'persons' have for their actions, Weber insisted upon the irreducibility of different spheres of ethical life and on the consequent necessity of applying different ethical protocols to them:

An official who receives a directive he considers wrong can and is supposed to object to it. If his superior insists on its execution, it is his duty and even his honor to carry it out as if it corresponded to his innermost conviction and to demonstrate in this fashion that his sense of duty stands above his personal preference. . . . This is the ethos of office. A political leader acting in this way would deserve contempt. He will often be compelled to make compromises, that means, to sacrifice the less to the more important. . . . To be above Parties – in truth, to remain outside the struggle for power – is the official’s role, while this struggle for personal power and the resulting political responsibility, is the lifeblood of the politician as well as the entrepreneur. (my emphasis)

By demanding – in the name of the ‘market’, the ‘customer’ or whatever – that the ethical conduct of the public administrator be judged according to the ethos of the entrepreneur the discourse of enterprise requires public sector bureaucrats to assume the role of businesspersons. As Le
cmore (1987: 99) argues, such ‘confusion of realms’ can have disastrous consequences. In seeking to instil a strong sense of personal ‘ownership’ for particular policies amongst public administrators, for example, proponents of ‘enterprise’ (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992) seem to have completely lost sight of the bureau’s crucial civic and ethical role in separating public administration from personal moral enthusiasms.

Such ‘forgetfulness’ is inscribed within all too many of the public sector reforms currently taking place across liberal democratic societies. In Britain, for example, the introduction of ‘entrepreneurial’ norms and techniques into the civil service as a result of the Next Steps initiative seems destined to undermine the bureaucratic ethos. Top civil servants, it would appear, are increasingly being encouraged to adopt a ‘can do’ style of conduct characterized by ‘decisiveness and an ability to get things done, rather than the more traditional approach which lays greater emphasis on analysis of options and recommendations for action based upon that analysis’ (RIPA, 1987). The obvious danger here is that public servants are now required to develop ‘personal’ enthusiasms for specific policies and projects and as a consequence the bureaucratic (liberal pluralist) ‘ethos of responsibility’ is being eroded. As Richard Chapman (1991: 3) has argued with regard to these reforms, ‘the emphasis on enterprise, initiative, and a more business-like style of management . . . seems oddly at variance with the expectations of officials working in a bureaucracy’.

The central mechanism of Next Steps – the replacement of a ‘unified’ civil service by a host of ‘autonomous’ agencies – is explicitly represented as a means of enterprising up the public sector. The ‘new’ agencies, it is argued, are structured to enable civil servants to ‘obtain a sense of ownership and personal identification with the product’ (Goldsworthy, 1991.6). Rather than seeking to moderate the perfectly understandable enthusiasms of public officials for particular projects and policies the agency system seems designed to incite them.

Staff, we are told, now often think of themselves as belonging to a particular department or agency, not to a wider civil service. They work in units that, far
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from displaying a team spirit with a common ethos, compete with each other... (Chapman, 1991b: 3).

The advocates of these reforms seem unable to imagine that business management and public administration are not identical in every respect. While there is a sense in which the state and the business concern are both rational ‘enterprises’ – deliberately and explicitly directed towards advancing goals and objectives in an efficient and effective manner – public administration differs from business management primarily because of the constraints imposed by the political environment within which the management processes are conducted. As Neville Johnson (1983: 193–4) amongst others has argued:

Undoubtedly, the official in public service is... engaged extensively in the use and deployment of resources taken away from the people he or she serves and returned to them as benefits and entitlements legitimated by the system of government. It is clear that in these circumstances he or she bears a responsibility for the efficient use of resources and to this end must be ready and able to use such methods of management as will offer the best prospect of optimal performance. But the function of officials cannot be exhaustively defined in terms of achieving results efficiently. There is also a duty to observe the varied limits imposed on action by public bodies and to satisfy the political imperatives of public service — loyalty to those who are politically responsible, responsiveness to parliamentary and public opinion, sensitivity to the complexity of the public interest, honesty in the formulation of advice, and so on. It is out of these commitments that a professional ethic was fashioned in the public services. Even if this has weakened in recent years we cannot afford to dispense with it. This is because a system of representative government does require officials to act as the custodians of the procedural values it embodies.

The contemporary concern with efficient management, with performance, and with securing results, should not be allowed to obscure this fact. The pursuit of better management in government, important though it is, has to recognize the political limits to which it is subject.

Simply representing public bureaucracy in economic terms as an inefficient form of organization fails to take account of the crucial ethical and political role of the bureau in liberal democratic societies. If bureaucracy is to be reduced or abandoned and an entrepreneurial style of management adopted then it must be recognized that while ‘economic efficiency’ might be improved in the short term, the longer term costs associated with this apparent ‘improvement’ may well include fairness, probity, complex equality and other crucial ‘qualitative’ features of liberal democratic government. As Chapman (1991a: 17) argues:

When attention is focused on public sector management as distinct from management in other contexts, a distinctively bureaucratic type of organization, with accountability both hierarchically and to elected representatives, may mean that far from being inefficient it is in fact the most suitable type of organization... Consequently, regarding bureaucracy as an inefficient type of organization may reflect a superficial understanding of bureaucracy and, perhaps, a blinkered appreciation of public sector management. Bureaucracy may be more expensive than other types of organization, but that is not surprising when democracy is not necessarily the cheapest form of government.

We are in no danger of forgetting the disasters and dangers to which public bureaucracies are prone if we remind ourselves every now and again of the threats – including those posed by an unbridled entrepreneurialism – against which they offer protection.

Concluding remarks

There may well be a compelling case for making certain bureaucracies more responsive to the publics they serve. It is also possible that particular ‘entrepreneurial’ approaches to such a project are not without merit – certain services currently supplied by state bureaucracies might be better run by civic organizations, enhancing rather than endangering the liberal democratic art of separation. However, these decisions should be made on a case by case basis. Admitting the sagacity of such a move in one case does not mean that all services can or should be removed from public bureaucracies and handed over to civic organizations. To harbour the desire that they should be to lose sight of the bureau’s crucial political and ethical role in separating public administration from moral absolutism.

The public bureaucracy is a key institution of liberal democratic societies. Reforms of this institution – such as reductions in its size and cost – may be welcomed as long as they do not undermine its ethical and political role as outlined above.

Similarly, arguing that there are distinct limits to the efficacy of deploying entrepreneurial norms and techniques within the public sector does not amount to saying that such forms of governance are uniformly bad. It simply means that such norms and techniques and the conceptions of personhood they give rise to should not be unilaterally imposed upon other spheres of existence.

Suitably regionalized, both bureaucratic and entrepreneurial forms and styles of conduct can be reconciled, if never definitively. Not definitively because the liberal democratic ‘art of separation’ never manages to achieve anything like total regionalization. Since the lines of demarcation are ambiguous they are always likely to be drawn here and there, experimentally and often wrongly. This is the unavoidable risk of liberal democracy. As Lefort (1988:19) has argued, the emergence of liberal democratic regimes means ‘the dissolution of the markers of certainty’.

However, even when the separations do hold they must always be in tension, for the distinctive habits of action of the different constitutive ‘spheres’ will tend to undercut each other. It is doubtful whether the lines can ever be stabilized, and the changing character of states and markets requires, in any case, their continual revision, ‘so the arguing and fighting
over the location of the lines has no foreseeable end’ (Walzer, 1984: 328–3).

Notes

1 William Waldegrove, the Minister responsible for public services, admitted being ‘greatly cheered by the ringing endorsement in the report of the belief of the Public Accounts Committee that there is absolutely no contradiction between the new efficiency structures we have brought in and the maintenance of proper standards’ (reported in the Guardian, 28 January 1994, p. 1).

2 It is interesting to note that bureaucracy is always represented as an entirely passive form. There is never any acknowledgement of the productive capacities of bureaucratic organization; that ‘bureaucracy’ actively constructs a predictable environment rather than simply being ‘suited to’ some already existing stable space.

3 In this regard it needs to be remembered that at the time of its emergence – in the period of the European religious wars fought in the name of moral absolutes – it was precisely the bureaucracy’s capacity to divorce public administration from private moral enthusiasm that helped establish it as the privileged instrument of pragmatic statucraft. The bureaucratic capacity to provide a buffer between personal principles and civic virtues is a political achievement that it is always easy to underestimate (I would like to thank Ian Hunter for drawing my attention to this and the following point).

4 Think of those modern political arenas in which public conduct and personal ideals are not divorced – including the former Yugoslavia and Lebanon. It is all too easy, especially for social and human science ‘radicals’, to forget that the capacity of bureaucracy to divorce politics from absolute principles is a historically contingent and fragile achievement that those of us who live in pacified societies should not take for granted.

5 There are a number of famous examples of the disasters that can beset when public officials act in manner befitting the conduct of an entrepreneur or a politician. With regard to British public administration, see, for example, Richard Chapman’s (1988: 302–3) discussion of the Chichele Down case.

References


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