



## On Anti-modernism and Managerial Pseudo-liberalism\*

Thomas Armbrüster

**review of:**

Paul du Gay (2000) *In Praise of Bureaucracy – Weber, Organization, Ethics*. London: Sage. (PB: pp.159, £15.99, ISBN 0-7619-5504-6)

For some decades now, bureaucracy and bureaucrats have been under severe critique and denigration from a variety of strands. To some, a bureaucracy is the epitome of the encrusted, traditional organisation unable to change, and the bureaucrat is the carrier of resistance to change, devoted to securing his/her turf and keeping his/her pension with a minimum of commitment to work. To others, a bureaucracy is the archetype of the anonymous organisation in which faceless individuals make entirely intransparent and thus arbitrary decisions, and the bureaucrat is the epitome of the authoritarian heeler who slavishly obeys to the commands of his/her superiors no matter of the moral implications. Bureaucracy, therefore, is supposed to be the opposite not only of innovativeness, freshness, and change, but also of democracy and morality.

Paul du Gay's *In Praise of Bureaucracy* is a remarkably brave pleading against these allegations and a forceful defence of the bureaucratic ethos. His endeavour is indeed bold, for not only is he going against the severe attacks that have been levelled against bureaucracy from various sides, and not only is he targeting at the currently prevalent enthusiasm for entrepreneurial reforms of public services, but he is also, to stick to military terms here, shooting with all intellectual canons at two scholars that have had considerably influence within the social-scientific landscape over the last ten to twenty years. And, to say it from the beginning, du Gay does so in a largely convincing manner.

---

\* Many thanks to Erhard Friedberg and the editors of *ephemera* for helpful comments on this review.

Du Gay's objective is to defend bureaucracy and the legitimacy of state-administrative procedures against charges from mainly two strands – a philosophical-ethical and a neoliberal-entrepreneurial. In order to outline the bureaucratic ethos, du Gay is drawing on an aspect of Max Weber's work that has rarely been recognised. Within standard Weberianism, du Gay argues, Weber's notions are typically presented such that bureaucratisation corresponds to the development of formal and instrumental rationalization, ultimately leading to the notorious 'iron cage' of bureaucracy. What is often disregarded is the positive connotation that Weber assigns to the bureaucratic ethos, namely the commitment to equal treatment of citizens, dissociation from value-laden aspects of human life, and impartial conduct free from status, social background, or party-political considerations.

On this basis, du Gay sets out to present the ethos of bureaucracy as a necessary feature of liberal-democratic states and explores the allegations of MacIntyre (1981) and Bauman (1989) against bureaucracy.<sup>1</sup> He argues that MacIntyre's image of the bureaucratic manager is based on both a misunderstanding of Weber and an idealization of the integrated, virtuous, moral person. Du Gay's arguments amount to the charge that MacIntyre's treatise is based on the assumption that there are more virtuous and less virtuous persons, and that the best will be achieved if the 'most developed', most moral and virtuous persons – rather than institutions, rules, and their bureaucratic administrators – are in managerial positions. It is fascinating to read how du Gay, by critically discussing the telos of human life on which MacIntyre's insists, carves out and illustrates an idealist, theologically essentialist, and ultimately anti-pluralist element of MacIntyre's arguments.

Du Gay's review of Bauman's take on bureaucracy is in no way milder. As in the case of MacIntyre, du Gay argues that Bauman's representation of bureaucracy is one-sided, as Bauman only refers to the potentially de-responsibilising character of bureaucratic procedures and not to the bureaucratic ethos of justice. According to du Gay, the Holocaust is based on reasons that are the very antithesis of Bauman's, namely on the overcoming of the legitimacy of bureaucratic procedures by the enthusiasm for and illegitimate coercion of the National Socialist movement. The decisions that led to the Holocaust were ultimately based on racist and party-political convictions, and thus on normative and moral sentiments rather than on the application of rules.

With respect to the enthusiasm of the excellence movement and the anti-bureaucratic character of new public management, du Gay has another axe to grind. He takes the writings of management gurus as representing the current managerial mood and

---

1 MacIntyre's book *After Virtue* (1981) is a moral-philosophical critique of management and the manager. His point is that the conduct of management has corroded to a purely instrumental function of employing means without considering the ends, which represents a more general moral decay of modernity. Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) views bureaucracies as representing modernity in that they account for a functional division of labor and a separation of technical from moral responsibility. He argues that bureaucratic organizations have a fundamentally dehumanizing aspect in that they, among others, distance the conduct of decisions from the final product of decisions, and thus contribute to the possibility and execution of the Holocaust.

convincingly shows the distorted view of bureaucracy inherent in the quasi-religious culture of entrepreneurialism, especially the pseudo-liberal character of the excellence movement (the supposed liberation from constraining rules, alienation at work, lack of emotion, lack of belonging, etc.). In the second part of the book, du Gay then applies the insights gained in the first part to the reforms of public management, which are closely related to the excellence movement and intellectually supported by the moral-philosophical anti-bureaucratism discussed above. Du Gay reminds us that the administrative responsibility for public interest and constitutional legitimacy is more complex than an often oversimplifying managerial view holds, and that the excesses of the entrepreneurial excellence movement need to be closely observed and, if necessary, tamed in order to secure the achievements of procedural justice and legality.

Previous publications of du Gay on which he draws in *In Praise of Bureaucracy* have been criticized for mainly two points: that he relies on a flawed dualism between bureaucracy and enterprise culture, and that he overstates the dominance of the enterprise discourse and presents a too deterministic view of the excellence movement (Fournier and Grey, 1999). As far as the book reviewed here is concerned, neither point holds. First, the dualism between bureaucracy and enterprise is not the creation of du Gay but of his opponents. Du Gay clarifies and exposes the assumptions of their arguments and shows that their demonisation of bureaucracy creates a dualism between good and evil that is based on a gross lack of understanding of the bureaucratic ethos. In a response to Fournier and Grey (du Gay 2000b), he also outlines in greater detail that the theoretical and empirical distinction between entrepreneurial and bureaucratic forms of government is less problematic than Fournier and Grey claim. Second, the reproach of inflating the dominance of the excellence movement as too deterministic is largely based on minor examples (Fournier and Grey, 1999: 118, 121) which simply do not suffice to put forward an argument along the lines of 'it all is not quite as bad as du Gay thinks'. While Fournier and Grey may have a point that TQM and contractualisation are not the best examples of anti-bureaucratic entrepreneurialism, their point that resistance to excellence-based reforms, for example by medical doctors in an NHS district or within a small family business, should have been taken into account seems to me an overestimation of the influence of resistance and a gross underestimation of the significance of the overall movement (for a recent review and more thoughts on resistance see Fleming, 2001). In fact, what Fournier and Grey stigmatise as 'deterministic' is exactly one of the main strengths of du Gay's arguments: the clarity with which he carves out and exposes the inherent assumptions and the unconsciously anti-liberal character of influential management ideas and concepts. Throughout the book, du Gay shows his awareness that the defects of bureaucracies are clear and manifold. His point is that both bureaucratic and entrepreneurial forms of government have their benefits and drawbacks, and that the drawbacks of bureaucratic procedures cannot be eliminated without simultaneously abolishing their benefits for a liberal-democratic order.

One point of Fournier and Grey (1999) deserves more attention: the observation that the practices of bureaucracy never realized the positive conception du Gay assigns to them, for example that there is a lot of patronage within bureaucracies (Fournier and Grey, 1999: 119). While this does not contradict to du Gay's argument, because he continuously states throughout the book that he is aware of the insufficient conduct and

exercise of an otherwise valid principle, he could have elaborated more on the question of why this link between ethos and practice is often severed and whether the ethos can in fact be put into practice. This is a very central point. An implicit or explicit claim that the ethos of bureaucracy is good, only the practice is bad, is reminiscent of similar statements on Marxism: the idea was good, but unfortunately the practice of real socialism was bad. Essentially, and paradoxically, this is an idealist position. As soon as good ideas assume organisational forms, the 'crooked timber of humanity' (Isaiah Berlin) accounts for a practice that inevitably leads to a distortion or deformation of the idea, and this cannot be disregarded in the assessment of the idea.

There is another point at which some more elaboration would have strengthened du Gay's arguments. In his treatise of Bauman (1989), du Gay mainly points at the amoral character mistakenly ascribed to bureaucracy. What he does not fully develop is the point that once the bureaucratic ethos of legitimacy has been abolished, for example by coercion as in the case of National Socialism, then administrative rules may indeed have the fatal effect of de-responsibilisation. This argument can be derived from a juxtaposition of du Gay's points with a recent German-language publication (Balcke, 2001) that is based on historical research on the *Inspektion der Konzentrationslager* (the public authority in charge of the administration of the concentration camps in Germany and its occupied territory until 1945). Du Gay is right to argue that the National Socialist movement had to overthrow the legitimacy of legal-administrative bureaucracies through politicising the institutional organs of the state by forced appointments of party members to leading institutional positions. However, once the Nazis were in power in all institutions and the bureaucratic ethos of legitimacy had successfully been thrown over board, the administrative procedures functioned in favour of the lethal goals in that rules provided the necessary de-responsibilisation for the normal-citizen culprits (Balcke, 2001). This way, du Gay could have given more credits to MacIntyre and Bauman, which would have led to a confinement of their arguments rather than a total rejection of their place in organisation studies and social theory. Bureaucracy thus remains a two-edged issue, and thanks to du Gay we now know that it indeed is two-edged, and not only one-edged as many would have it.

In summary, most parts of *In Praise of Bureaucracy* are compellingly argued, even if the totality with which du Gay rejects the arguments of MacIntyre and Bauman may be exaggerated. It is a relatively short book and would have benefited from more attention to the two above points (the relation of ethos and practice, and the fatal effect of rules once the bureaucratic ethos has been abolished), but nevertheless it markedly enhances our comprehension of bureaucracy. Moreover, it has considerable implications for two continuing debates in social theory: the discourse on Weber and the disputes on modernism versus postmodernism. With regard to Weber, du Gay succeeds in providing an alternative account of the rationalization and iron-cage views that are mostly read in Weber's treatise of bureaucracy. Weber does not lend himself to the normative dualism between rationality and morality that has been the basis for much of the bureaucracy critique, because his notion of impersonality is closely connected with the humanitarian ethos of disregard to status, origin, ascription, party-political or personal preferences, and religious or normative morality. While this insight in the connection between bureaucracy and democracy is not entirely new (Mouzelis, 1968; Perrow, 1972; Beetham, 1996), the vividness with which du Gay elaborates this point clarifies a facet

of Weber with which many earlier interpreters had not fully come to terms with. Second, du Gay's contribution to the discourse on modernism versus post-modernism should not be underestimated, despite the sometimes drastic character of his arguments. Taking Bauman (1993) as an example, du Gay (2000a: 55-59) is alerting the scientific community that postmodern allegations towards modernity must beware of misrepresenting modernity and falsely juxtaposing it toward postmodernity, for example by presenting reason as 'madness of rationality'. In addition, he alerts us that anti-modernist positions need to beware of sentiments that may carry the label of postmodernity, but whose moral or transcendental basis may resemble the beliefs of pre-modernity.

Beyond these contributions to social theory, du Gay's book has another offer to make: to view management and organisation theory through a political-liberal (in stark contrast to the economic neo-liberal) lens. He shows that the supposedly libertarian character of the neo-'liberal' excellence movement is ultimately anti-libertarian, and thus provides a cornerstone for an alternative, no less critical position to management and organisation than Foucauldian, Frankfurt-school or labour-process approaches. Although the term liberalism is rarely mentioned throughout the book, du Gay's treatise is a defence of and call for political liberalism, properly understood. It dissects the enthusiastic management language of 'opportunities' and 'challenges' and convincingly shows the irrefutably metaphysical basis of the enterprise culture. Thus *In Praise of Bureaucracy* clarifies that the neo-'liberal' plea and enthusiasm for privatisation, de-bureaucratisation and anti-interventionism has certainly to do with economic liberalism, but next to nothing with political liberalism. There has always been a gulf between these two sets of ideas, but to my mind this important boundary has often been collapsed in labour-process or poststructuralist theorizing by putting 'liberalism' in general into the corner of neo-conservatism. *In Praise of Bureaucracy* clarifies this distinction second to none, and it should alert us that the neo-'liberal' mainstream may well be capable of eroding the sense of legitimacy not only in the arena of management but in the public in general. The fact that the erosion of legitimacy and legality, based on religion, morality and the enterprise culture, has taken hold of governments of superpowers indicates how far we have travelled. Du Gay's book could not be more timely.

## references

- Balcke, J. (2001) *Verantwortungsentlastung durch Organisation. Die 'Inspektion der Konzentrationslager' und der KZ-Terror* [Relief From Responsibility by Means of Organisation: The 'Inspektion der Konzentrationslager' and the Concentration-camp Terror]. Tübingen: Edition Diskord.
- Bauman, Z. (1989) *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bauman, Z. (1993) *Postmodern Ethics*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Beetham, D. (1996) *Bureaucracy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- du Gay, P. (2000a) *In Praise of Bureaucracy: Weber, Organization, Ethics*. London: Sage.
- du Gay, P. (2000b) 'Enterprise and its Futures: A Response to Fournier and Grey', *Organization*, 7(1): 165-183.
- Fleming, P. (2001) 'Beyond the Panopticon?', *ephemera*, 1(2): 190-194.
- Fournier, V. and C. Grey (1999) 'Too much, too little, and too often: a critique of du Gay's analysis of enterprise', *Organization*, 6 (1): 107-128.
- MacIntyre, A. C. (1981) *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. London: Duckworth.

Mouzelis, N. P. (1968) *Organisation and Bureaucracy*. Chicago: Aldine.

Perrow, C. (1972) *Complex Organizations: A Critical Essay*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co.

**the author**

Thomas Armbrüster is a Lecturer/Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at the University of Mannheim, Germany, and currently a Visiting Scholar at the Scandinavian Consortium for Organizational Research at Stanford University. He received a PhD in Sociology from the London School of Economics and previously worked as a Research Officer and Lecturer in Organisational Behaviour at the University of Reading, UK. His research interests comprise the management-consulting industry and critical-liberal approaches to management and organization theory.

Address: University of Mannheim, Faculty of Business Administration, 68131 Mannheim, Germany

Email: [t.armbruester@uni-mannheim.de](mailto:t.armbruester@uni-mannheim.de)