

Book Review: Managing Modernity: Beyond Bureaucracy?

Edited by Stewart Clegg, Martin Harris and Harro Höpfl

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*In this collection of essays Stewart Clegg and co-authors envisage the end of bureaucracy, where big corporations and public sector organizations are open and free of constraints. **Patrick Dunleavy** is intrigued but not convinced, arguing that all forms of 'beyondism' and 'post-x' social theory are inherently dissatisfying. If the authors really knew what was happening now or next, they'd tell us.*



Managing Modernity: Beyond Bureaucracy? Edited by Stewart Clegg, Martin Harris and Harro Höpfl. Oxford University Press. 324 pages. 2011.

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What will the business and public sector organizations of the near future look like? Will they resemble the cutting edge or forefront organizations of our time? Or has an unrecognized revolution already gone on more generally inside the shells of major corporations or government departments and agencies? Have social scientists overdone the 'Don't believe the hype!' reaction to the endless claims of new businesses and hyperactive politicians to be bringing about 'transformational change'?

Some of the contributors to this edited collection are in no doubt. "A hybrid organizational landscape is taking shape", [Jannis Kallinikos](#) tells us, "in which many constraints on the free flow of people and resources are lifted. Corporations, but even more so public agencies may increasingly come to resemble open public squares where each can stroll, sample the wares and have refreshment – a new agora perhaps?".

Steady on there – I think this is a slight 'atomic-powered helicopter' moment! Anyone trying to enter these 'squares' is still going to need money, position or power, especially to get anything done there. But Kallinikos is surely right that the advent of more-pervasively distributed knowledge and information-processing capability in most households must imply far-reaching changes in the level of informational power that used to rest with major organizational forms.

The anti-pole at which the book takes aim is the concept of bureaucracy, defined by the 1820s in Germany as the 'rule of offices and the pen' (i.e. documented decisions with a reliable archive). Much later Max Weber made some scattered (and often scatty) comments on bureaucracy, imbuing it with both a metaphysical significance as carrier of modernization and rationalization, and a more elaborated operational definition. Weber also insisted that bureaucracy was like the extended household of a prince or ruler, and not at all like the calculative capacity of capitalist firms – but these passages have long since been forgotten, as they are here. For the contributors and editors this backstory is not part of their need for 'bureaucracy'.

All the more theoretical chapters of the book follow a now well-established pattern of 'post-it' or 'beyondist' social theory in which a simplified version of concept X is delineated, only for the author to claim that we are already in (or will soon reach) a post-X phase. This approach is inherently dissatisfying – if the authors really knew what was happening now or next, they'd tell us using a substantive label – instead of assuring us only that it is 'not X'. Social scientists rarely have the standard chutzpah of business books in predicting change, and so they typically hedge their bets, adding an equivocating question mark (as here, *Beyond*



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Bureaucracy?), and often arguing that a 'hybrid' form of existing X and the not-X (that is coming but not-quite-here-yet) is 'emerging'. There are several different flavours of such formulations on offer in this volume.

Yet the central problem for beyondist and post-it thought has always been that all the previous candidates for X – such as 'modernity' and 'industrial society' – have been deeply unlikely to ever be superceded. The same is true of 'bureaucracy' – as the useful empirical chapters here actually demonstrate rather well about the UK. Stephen Ackroyd recapitulates his incisive analysis of the (let's face it) general uselessness and short-termism of British industrial management post 1945. And Ewen Sharp and Martin Harris amply demonstrate the continuing hyper-bureaucracy that characterizes the UK's National Health Service, despite years of 'quasi-markets' and a late-on IT revolution in [NPfit](#) that wasn't. Meanwhile there is always a nostalgic on hand to argue counter-intuitively that after all X was very useful in its day, and we really should not throw out the baby with the bathwater – Paul du Gay duly obliges here for bureaucracy.

The truth is that bureaucracy is not going anywhere, nor it is being hybridized in any meaningful sense. Bureaucracy is evolving rapidly, as it always has done. (Indeed [Bernard Silberman](#) famously demonstrated that even at the heart of big states, there were multiple, diverging 'rational bureaucratic' paradigms by the beginning of the twentieth century). Nowadays networks are clearly doing more, but we are not in a 'network society' as [Manuel Castells](#) (a big picture beyondist) has argued. Bureaucracies can do networks, and have done networks for decades already. [John van Reenan, Luis Garicano and colleagues](#) have ably demonstrated that modern ICT changes both centralize (the network effect) and decentralize (the database effect) in dialectical ways.

So corporations are variegating. The business book hype that somehow corporations like Apple or Google are less 'bureaucratic' has recently dissolved, with the [portrait of Steve Jobs](#) as a driven control freak. The very similar control freakery that was always [core to Google](#) is also beginning to show in its public stances more and more. These are funky forms of business bureaucracy right enough, but if anything they are more controlled and centralized than their predecessors.

Similarly, government bureaucracies in big OECD states are certainly changing as staff numbers fall and many outsource vital IT services to multi-national system integrators, to create [digital era governance](#). But the realities of political and organizational power in the contemporary state remain what they ever were, concentrated and controlled. The 'network' or 'collaborative state' beloved of some [American pluralists](#) might now have more ordinary folk alerting their local authorities to broken street lights than before. Yet the USA and other advanced countries also have an enormous 'surveillance state' apparatus in place, one that monitors (and aggressively interdicts) more people and behaviours in more locations than at any time in human history.

None of this means that this valuable book should not have been attempted. It is important that senior and committed social scientists should stop looking safely backwards and start peering over the horizon more. So Stewart Clegg and his fellow editors have done us a service, and in the process synoptically reviewed a lot of valuable material of great interest for anyone studying large organizations. I'm just hoping we can begin to look forward in future in more articulated, systematic and scientific ways, as the UK government's [Foresight](#) organization has tried to do. We need to move beyond beyondism.

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