DISSOLVING THE IRON CAGE?

TOCQUEVILLE, MICHELS, BUREAUCRACY[1]

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TOCQUEVILLE, MICHELS, BUREAUCRACY AND THE PERPETUATION OF ELITE POWER

Abstract

Modern management theory often forgets more than it remembers. "What's new?" is the refrain. Yet, we suggest, there is much that we should already know from which we might appropriately learn, "Lest we forget". The current paper takes its departure from two points of remembrance that bear on the sustained assaults on bureaucracy that have been unleashed by the critiques of recent years. These critiques include the new public management literature as well as its inspiration in the new literature of cultural entrepreneurialism. Both promise to dissolve bureaucracy's iron cage. We explain, using the classical political themes of oligarchy, democracy, and the production of elite power, why we should consider such transubstantiation alchemical by confronting contemporary discussions with the wisdom of an earlier, shrewder knowledge, whose insights we need to recall to understand the complexity of the hybridizations between supposedly opposite models of organizations.

Introduction

We argue in this paper that bureaucracy, far from being superseded, is rejuvenating, through complex processes of hybridism in which supposedly opposite political structures and principles, the democratic and oligarchic, intermingle and propagate in such a way that most criticisms of bureaucracy are misplaced and misleading (du Gay 2000; Courpasson and Reed 2004). However, what is being created is not a reproduction of the Weberian ideal type but a new empirical configuration, an empirical hybridity. We suggest two complementary explanations as to why this unexpected refurbishment of bureaucracies might be underway, that derive from a reading of largely forgotten and ancient history: Michels' *Political Parties* (1915), and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (2000). Michels provides compelling hypotheses concerning the complex political dynamics facilitating the perpetuation of oligarchies, which are intricately tied up with two paradoxical democratic features of large bureaucracies: rivalries and contestations among leaders as well as elite fragmentation and circulation (Courpasson 2004) while Tocqueville shows how the inherent dynamics of democracies, transforming into monocratic regimes, in Weberian terms (1968), can turn into mild despotic regimes.

We will address these fundamental questions by suggesting that if the core *political* and *moral* principles of bureaucracy have not been fundamentally changed, we can witness a significant softening of its *administrative* principles and systems. This is what we call "soft bureaucracy" (Courpasson 2000b). We will use the example of project management, to suggest that this type of configuration, one of the hallmarks of entrepreneurial organizations, is facilitating the refurbishment of bureaucratic systems.

Bureaucracy

Bureaucracy has, without any doubt, been identified as "the primary institutional characteristic of highly complex and differentiated societies" (Landau 1972: 167), epitomizing "the modern era" (Blau and Meyer 1971: 10). Its greatest theorist was Max Weber (1978). Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy was one aspect of his overall attempt to understand the features of Western civilization through the process of rationalization. For Weber, rationalization simply signifies that, in principle, individuals are increasingly likely to use calculation to master phenomena and things through the domination of rules and instrumental systems. Weber's insight was that in a social context, such as an organization, the process of bureaucratisation entailed by the rationalization process results in a diminution of freedom, initiative and individual power. People would be expected to become machine-like obedient objects, trapped in the "iron cage". The cage is the metaphorical instrument of dominant authority within which bureaucracy appears as a system of legitimate power "over" its members, neutralizing all potential sources of countervailing power. However, it is also clear, as Waters (1993) puts it, that if Weber was more interested in monocratic forms of organizations, he also extensively discussed polycratic forms, even if sometimes in an unsystematic way. For Waters (1993), polycracy, in Weberian terms, refers to an organization "in which power is divided among the members on a theoretically egalitarian basis but which is in principle capable of being aggregated in an "upward" direction" (Waters 1993: 56). Weber addresses three major polycratic forms: collegiality (1968: 271-84), direct democracy (1968: 289-92) and representative democracy (1968: 292-99; see also Mommsen [1974] on plebiscitarian democracy: 83-94).

In situations of bureaucratic rule, the domination of bureaucratic leaders is fundamentally based on knowledge, which makes the "professionalization of leadership thesis" (Michels

1915) an unexpected bridge between democratic regimes and bureaucratic structures: "Bureaucratic domination means fundamentally domination through … technical knowledge … [and] … knowledge growing out of experience in the service" (Weber 1968: 225). One way of reading Weber's account of bureaucracy is as a treatise on the formation of a particular type of moral character bounded by an emotionally strong sense of duty as a vocation, to which Michels counters the potential for its specialist knowledge to create elites.

Ideal types of bureaucracy

Weber's ideas about bureaucracy were transmitted through the methodology of ideal types. Weber's account of bureaucracy was not a representation for all seasons, an essential and eternal characterisation of a functionally necessary social form. As Weber conceived them ideal types were hypothetical, not a reference to something normatively ideal, but to an ideational type serving as a mental model that can be widely shared and used because analysts agree that it captures some essential features of a phenomenon here and-now. The ideal type does not correspond to reality but seeks to condense essential features of it in the model so that one can better recognize its real characteristics when it is encountered. It is not an embodiment of one side or aspect but the synthetic ideational representation of complex phenomena from reality.

Later, Schutz (1967) was to take issue with one aspect of Weber's approach to ideal types: were they a construct by the analysts or were they the analysts' account of the constructs in use by the members of the research setting in question. For Schutz it was not clear whether Weber's ideal types, in their basis in social action, were a member's category or one that belonged to analysts. He thought that the construction of types out of the concepts of everyday life should be such that they were grounded in the member's usage. However, once they were

refined by an analyst, the risk was that they became somewhat dissociated from everyday usage. An example of how slippage could occur is evident in the history of the concept of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy had been identified by Weber with elite constructions of organization that were widely known in common and shared amongst elite German echelons; these, in turn, were subsequently taken to be the literal depiction of the phenomenon, however and wherever it might subsequently have evolved. Thus, a historical conception of bureaucracy, identified with top managerial prerogative in German state organizations, defined what the bureaucracy was taken to be. Increasingly, definition replaced Weber's concern with technical rationality with the narrower conception of efficiency (Pugh 1966). The cultural, historical, institutional, political and economic analysis which Weber (1978) pioneered, within which his conception of bureaucracy was embedded, was overshadowed.

Because the ideal type was a construct from a highly specific place and time it would have been odd for later and different realities to correspond to it. Nonetheless, some sociologists made such comparisons. When writers such as Gouldner (1954) investigated organizations, they compared the realities they found with the type that they had inherited. However, since the type was always an imaginary and synthetic construct from a specific place and time this is not an immediately sensible activity. It ends up privileging the subjectivities of those members whose everyday usage first grounded the construct and using different circumstances in which other member's constructed other usage as material for constructions of other ideal types with which to question the limits of the initial conception. The type becomes reified. It takes on a life of its own. The analysts casting of the ideal type sets it in concrete and it is used long past its use-by date.

Weber's famous ideal type of bureaucracy was widely used as the basis for case studies (Burns and Stalker 1961; Selznick 1949). Increasingly, it was seen that bureaucracy could constitute a dehumanized world, a machine destroying emotions and individualities to attain its own goals of efficiency (Gouldner 1955). These views were hardly novel, nor was the most important point that Weber left out the unintended consequences of the internal working of a concrete bureaucracy (Merton 1940; Dubin 1949; Gouldner 1955; Crozier 1964). Later it was both heralded by, and seen as superseded in, taxonomic approaches to organizations (Pugh and Hickson 1976). These saw the ideal type elements abstracted by Weber with respect to German nineteenth century bureaucracy become the definitive features of a functionalist conception of organization structure as an essential form, determined in its particular patterns by specific local contingencies, such as size or technology. Analysis then became caught in a historical cul-de-sac of ever-diminishing returns as scholars sought to defend the essentially conceived structure against all comers (Donaldson 1996). As Martindale (1960: 383) suggested precipiently, we should "compare different empirical configurations, not empirical configurations and types" as any specific type is always historically bounded and "destined to be scrapped".

For several authors, analysing bureaucracy did not involve consideration of whether or not it actually existed but only examining the concrete conditions that might enable us to situate such and such organization somewhere along an abstract continuum (Gouldner 1956; Udy 1959). Hall's study of the degree of bureaucratisation tended to confirm that "bureaucracy in general may be viewed as a matter of degree, rather than of kind" (Hall 1963: 37). If all efficient bureaucracies were all alike, every inefficient bureaucracy would be inefficient in its own way, one might say. Bureaucracies rarely achieve efficiency in any pure state ; then the search should be for those forms of hybridity that they adopt rather than setting up an ideal,

abstracted type, as the standard measure of happiness and then proclaiming, dolefully, on the ruination of things.

Two criticisms of bureaucracy

What an ideal type captures is meaning: what counts for history is always the meaning of the people concerned in its production and interpretation. Nonetheless, despite the existence of plenty of sound historical advice to the contrary, the ideal type of bureaucracy has been subject to sustained criticism. Bureaucracy, construed as an ideal type, has been seen as the source of much of what is wrong in the contemporary world. Recent history has been replete with rallying cries against fundamental errors said to emanate from the bacillus of bureaucracy. It is a culture that, seemingly, must be terminated with extreme prejudice. Bureaucracy must be "banished" (Osborne and Plastrik 1997); government must be "reinvented" (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). The reason is simple: bureaucracy is inefficient. In the popular view, as du Gay (2000) or Pugh (1966) point out, bureaucracy is synonymous with inefficient business administration, pettifogging legalism, and red tape. For critics, demolition of bureaucratic systems will further efficiency: "Employee empowerment does not mean every decision in the organization must be made democratically or through consensus" (Osborne and Plastrik 1997: 227). Empowerment fosters effectiveness not more egalitarian and democratic settings.

On the other hand, there are critics more enamoured of democracy than efficiency: because the attributes of bureaucracy "are maladaptive when massive change, environmental dynamism and considerable uncertainty are the norm" and there is a "growing asymmetry of power between the managerial agents in charge of them [the mega global firms] and most other groups in the society, including consumers, employees, and members of the local

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communities in which the firms' operations are located" (Child and McGrath 2001: 1136; 1140). The hierarchical configuration of power and the multiplication of different stakeholders mean that power and representation must be seen from different perspectives. Power within the bureaucratic apparatus fails to reflect the representation of interests to which it should attend.

At stake is the nature of the implicit contract between employees and organizations. As Heckscher and Donnellon (1994) or Ashcraft (2001) illustrate, entrepreneurial organizations try to base their efficiency and legitimacy on a different model of commitment of organization members, supported by a strategy of decentralization of authority, the granting of empowerment, and the "substitution of normative identification with the organization for the purely utilitarian traditional employment nexus" (Child and McGrath 2001: 1143). The traditional bureaucratic commitment "We will take care of you if you do what we have asked", once premised on the celebrated balance of inducements and contributions (March and Simon 1950), seems to be a dead letter (Heckscher and Applegate 1994: 7). Democracy and the question of morality are relevant to the post-bureaucratic trends they describe. The ideal type of post-bureaucratic organisation has very significant similarities to that of democracy. Its ruling concept is that "everyone takes responsibility for the success of the whole" (Heckscher 1994: 24). Therefore, such organizations must develop informed consensus amongst their members, rather than relying on authority and hierarchical supervision. The development of agreement has to be situated in interactive settings where the gathering of information increases collective power. Politics is characterized by the use of influence and persuasion rather than power exercised through command and control. Trust is a crucial resource in such settings because everyone must believe that the others are seeking mutual benefit rather than maximizing personal gain (Heckscher 1994: 25). Leadership is not

exercised through complex systems of rules but via guidelines for action, which take the form of principles, "expressing the reasons behind the rules" (Heckscher 1994: 26). Internal social processes decide who decides, the decision-making power not being derived from official rank but from the nature of the problems at hand. A deliberative and interactive structure is supposed to come from the necessary fluidity of internal relationships. But post-bureaucracies are not communities of friendship, but "networks of relationships based on specific performances and abilities (…) people one can "work with" on particular projects rather than "live with" (Heckscher 1994: 55).

In the democratic critique, the most salient implications of post-bureaucracy are conceived as political: the relationships between individual members, and between members and their organization, the nature of power and authority, the conception of equity instead of equality and, above all, the existence of flexible and permanent dialogues concerning the rules of action. There were earlier ideal types that could have been drawn on, such as Rothschild-Whitt and Whitt's (1986) and Rothschild-Whitt's (1979) collectivist organization, or Lazega's (2000) collegial organization, to animate the emergent models but they were constructed in terms of mutually opposite criteria and thus were hardly suitable for the task at hand. The task at hand, the understanding of an emergent reality seemingly contradictory to that represented in the classical types, requires a different kind of understanding, an understanding of a hybrid reality rather than an idealized essence.

Understanding hybrids

The key bureaucratic characteristic of the new hybrid organizations is that they retain a need for the iron fist of strong and centralized control mechanisms, wrapped up in the velvet glove of consent. More intrusive and intensive control techniques are replaced with legitimated

general guidelines (du Gay 1994), which softly and progressively erode the autonomy of individuals, while securing their consent to new forms of governmentality by which they increasingly regulate themselves (Pitsis et al 2003). As Reed puts it, "the delicate balance between trust and control has moved very definitely in favour of the latter" (Reed 2001: 221), giving way to new forms of bureaucratic power concentrations (Courpasson 2000a).

Several common reasons have been advanced to explain the proliferation of hybrid organizational forms; these include the necessity of adapting to changing markets and consumer tastes in favour of product diversity, as well as the weaknesses of large-scales firms (in a very deterministic manner) to cope with new market demands because of the inefficiency of multiple layers of hierarchy, or their structural inertia. Another argument is based on what Polanyi calls "general reciprocity" (in Powell 1987: 83), a model of resource allocation where networks of individuals engaged in mutually supportive actions and decisions are crucial. Just as in the post-bureaucratic model, individuals exist above all as embedded in networks of collaborative and reciprocal relationships, because reputation is the most credible sign of reliability and of the "quality" of trust one can put on an individual. Supervision here is not realized through a hierarchical apparatus, but thanks to the "communitarian" web of reciprocal controls that necessitates a careful reading of the "weak signs" produced in every part of the organization, which may produce a form of social consensus between members, as a strong substitute for formal rules and procedures, according to the advocates of hybrid firms.

In contemporary hybrids, the promotion of socio-economic cooperation is achieved through the manipulation of specific trust/control mechanisms, thanks, above all, to the form of networks (Castells 1996). These hybrids evoke some types of technologies of trust, which make politically viable a fuzzy, but nevertheless active, system of concentrated power. The

"organizational hybridisation" analysed by Ferlie et al (1996) in the British health-care sector, demonstrates the political aspect of the dynamics implied. Classical administrative [bureaucratic] power is maintained, because these hybrids "have the technical and ideological capacity to combine and re-combine selected elements of managerialism with pre-existing structures of political, administrative and professional power" (Reed 2001: 220). As Reed has argued (1999), these hybrids often generate considerable mistrust, if not downright opposition, on the part of some groups of experts, who sense a decline in the conditions enabling the exercise of autonomous judgement.

The question of power is therefore clearly at the core of the issue of organizational hybridity. The post-bureaucratic hybrid is a "loosened community" (Courpasson and Dany 2003), where relationships and groupings are temporarily maintained, where individuals' destinies are more and more separated, where the institutionalised dialogues and interactions are operated through sometimes uncertain and barely legible networks of control, of influence and of friendship. This is the very reason why these organizational arrangements need authoritarian structures to be effective. Moreover, as Powell suggests, the pressure on hybrid forms to perform may be intense, as the resources put into it increase the expectation of success, and oblige business leaders to implement tough supervisory processes. The underlying authoritarian mechanisms continue to shape the emergence of these hybrid forms, under the auspices of flexible structures and with the resources of bureaucratic power systems.

A hybrid is a system of tensions between opposed goals, building bridges between opposed sides of organizations, domination and self-determination (Romme 1999), in "the paradoxes and tensions that arise from enacting oppositional forms" (Ashcraft 2001: 131). In the same vein, Ackoff (1981; 1994; 1999) suggests a model of "democratic hierarchy" aimed at

improving the quality of work life, through the decentralization of power systems and participation in decision-making processes. Through this type of model, Ackoff considers it possible to prove that democracy is not only [mainly] a question of feeling and of improvement of self-determination and deliberative processes of action, but a question of efficiency: "democracy and efficiency are not inimitable; in fact they become more and more closely connected as the educational level and economic security of the workforce (as the citizens of a country) increase" (Ackoff 1994: 141).

For Ackoff, a democracy in an organizational context political is a regime based on three major features:

> "(1) The absence of an ultimate authority, the circularity of power ; (2) the ability of each member to participate directly or through representation in all decisions that affect him or her directly ; and (3) the ability of members, individually or collectively, to make and implement decisions that affect no one other than the decision-maker or decision-makers" (1994: 117).

Democracy is founded on a circular form of power because "anyone who has authority over others is subject to the collective authority of these others; hence its circularity" (Ackoff 1994: 118). But Ackoff is also a "realist" thinker. He reminds us that "divided labour must be coordinated and multiple coordinators must be coordinated; therefore, where complex tasks are involved, hierarchy cannot be avoided. Furthermore, hierarchies, contrary to what many assume, need not be autocratic" (Ackoff 1999: 181).

Adler (2001) analyses the hybrid move as concomitant to the general evolution of firms toward "trust and community systems". He suggests mapping institutions in a three-dimensional representation, making it possible to consider the variety of possible organizational models entailed by the hybridisation process (Adler 2001: 219). Hierarchy can be combined with trust mechanisms, producing first-degree bureaucratic hybrids, such as

"dynamic bureaucracy" (Blau 1955) or "enabling bureaucracy" (Adler and Borys 1996). He points out the "refinements of hierarchy" existing within business firms: the introduction of more formal procedures (TQM, product and software development processes), the strengthening of planning techniques (in HRM, in project management), of control instruments to assess the projects and performances. Simultaneously, in a post-bureaucratic manner, he argues that the necessary sharing of knowledge in business firms "depends equally critically on a sense of shared destiny … a sense of mutual trust" to improve and reinforce employee commitment. Even the form of trust entailed by contemporary organizations is rational, according to Adler: "leadership seems to have shifted toward a form of trust consonant with the ethos of 'fact-based management', independent inquiry" (Adler 2001: 227). He sees this shift as constituting a bureaucratic hybrid removed from the traditional bureaucratic deference to established authority, but which, simultaneously, relies on a rational and formalized apparatus. The rhetoric of trust and dialogue that constitutes the post-bureaucratic argument must not lead us simply to forget the existence of "façades of trust" (Hardy et al. 1998: 71), where trust is not necessarily undertaken "with reciprocity in mind and may, on the contrary, be intended to maintain or increase power differentials."

We argue that what these accounts of hybridity miss is that the inherent political dynamics of organizations and of democratic regimes lead to the unexpected reproduction of oligarchies and of the despotic regimes which surrounds these elite circles. It should not be unexpected that this is the case, for there are classical portents that point to the conclusion that bureaucratic political processes lead to the reproduction of concentrated authoritative systems. To develop this point, we suggest that there is still much to absorb from the classics, in whom the debates were first rehearsed, not only Weber (1978) but also even those relatively

neglected today, such as Michels' *Political Parties* (1915) and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (2000).

Michels and oligarchy

Michels first: the famous iron law of oligarchy states that "organization gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors, of the mandatories over the mandators, of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization, says oligarchy" (Michels 1915: 401). Michels provides compelling arguments suggesting institutionalizing (Selznick 1957) and circulating (Ocasio and Kim 1999) mechanisms of power are not exclusive but complementary dynamics within organizations. The persistence of an oligarchic tendency in organizations results from the circulatory trajectories of institutional oligarchs. Elite circulation is the result of the power entrenchment of oligarchs within the restricted boundaries of "inner circles" (Useem 1984). Thus, *Political Parties* is one of the most interesting examples of the intricately tied dynamics of oligarchy and democracy.

Two major political mechanisms enhance the perpetuation of oligarchies. The first is the professionalization of leadership and the parallel "immobility and passivity of the masses", as well as the cultural and educational distance between oligarchs and the governed, which is the basic element of any centralized system of power. Thus, professional knowledge, political skills, "this expert knowledge, which the leader acquires in matters inaccessible, or almost inaccessible, to the mass, gives him a security of tenure which conflicts with the essential principles of democracy" (Michels 1915: 84). But at the same time, this distance is maintained by the political apathy of people, who leave political questions "to the little group which makes a practice of attending meetings" (1915: 51). There is an explicit delegation of the treatment of political questions to a minority of individuals able to bear the personal

consequences of leadership responsibilities (Michels 1915: 60). The "technical indispensability" of oligarchs is therefore strengthened by the "gratitude felt by the crowd for those who speak and write on their behalf" (Michels 1915: 60).

The second mechanism is based on a complex dialectic leading oligarchs to protect themselves from potential rivals and the dynamics leading them to create willing internal elite sub-groups: the dynamics of co-optation, of insiders' appointments and of nominations based on value congruity (or social similarities) are well known in the managerial literature (Enz 1988; Boeker 1989; Westphal and Zajac 1995; Kanter 1977). According to Michels, what is important is the monitoring of rivalries by the oligarchs themselves (Michels 1915: 168; 170). The tendency to counter any potential opposition is even supported by the mass that, according to Michels, has "a certain natural distrust of all newcomers" (170). To counter opposition, oligarchy vests a limited amount of official power in potential rivals, including them in the administrative apparatus through titles and responsibilities. By using these conciliatory methods (176), oligarchs provide honours and rewards, and potential rivals "are thus rendered innocuous" (176).

The result of bureaucratic-oligarchic dynamics, for Michels, is "not so much a *circulation des elites* as a *reunion des elites*, an amalgam, that is to say, of the two elements" (177). Nursing and educating the potential rebels, and then, transforming them into selected aspirants and successors give to the oligarchic elite the power to choose the future leaders according to its own criteria and needs. Moreover, elite circulation is a means of destabilizing local teams and local orderings, stimulating the need for stable and reliable central leaders. Elite unification amalgamates with elite circulation at best: at worst, elite unification becomes the result of a process of fragmentation of the political body, diffusing the values and purposes of the

oligarchs through their very opponents with whom they share a fundamental value: the desire or will for power.

In such processes of fragmentation can be seen the traces of bureaucracy in the shape of paradoxical centralization/decentralization dynamics. An organization in which the elite circle is too small is more threatened by potential rivalries. Thus, oligarchy should seek to widen its base through the constitution of a large group of experts holding specialized knowledge that help to maintain the overall legitimacy of oligarchs, both through their presence as a group, and through the technical legitimacy they give to the elite (Michels 1915: 186-187). Simultaneously, by fragmenting the elite into sub-elites, oligarchs provoke decentralizing effects (Michels 1915: 196-197). Oligarchy enhances decentralizing tendencies through a fragmentation of authority, splitting up the central oligarchy into a number of smaller oligarchies (the sub-units). But this fragmentation, as in large bureaucracies, does not modify significantly the political structure which remains unchallenged, mainly because the critical political issues are discussed and deliberated in the small circles of the "headquarters".

Tocqueville and democracy

In political science Tocqueville undoubtedly remains a major reference for thinking critically about democracy, for he wholeheartedly analysed the most basic reasons for the weaknesses of democratic regimes. We suggest that the adaptation of his thought to the organizational context provides many insights. We will analyse three major Tocquevillean insights into the functioning of democratic regimes: the question of hierarchical relationships; the love of equality found in democratic peoples, and the power mechanisms used in democratic regimes. An argument about the evolution of democracies toward centralization and despotic forms of "management" will thus be suggested.

The nature of hierarchy in democratic settings

Democracy encourages pervasive feelings of equality shared by every member of the society. In the political sphere these are institutionalised in periodic elections, where we get to choose which members of the political elite will rule over us. In organizations in general, however, we have no such choice. We are, in law, masters or servants – the very categories that democracy was supposed to abolish. The volatility of society and the extreme mobility of individuals give a very specific colour to the association of servants and masters. For Tocqueville, in a democracy, servants tend to share the ideas, feelings, virtues and vices of all their contemporaries (Tocqueville 2000: 549): "In democracies, not only are servants equal among themselves; one can say that they are in a way the equals of their masters". This is simply due to the permanent and credible possibility for a servant to become a master himself. Thus, it is just a "temporary and free accord of their two wills" (Tocqueville 2000: 549) that gives the right to someone to exercise power over another. The temporary character of hierarchy is therefore due to the contractual delineation of the relationship. A shared judgment about the origin of power and obedience derives from the power of equality. But in democracies, while servants and masters may "have common occupations, they almost never have common interests" (Tocqueville 2000: 551). Obedience is freely promised, not forced, and it includes simply a rigorous execution of the contract, not respect, love or devotion as in aristocratic societies. Thus, for Tocqueville, under democracy, hierarchy is not dismembered or destroyed. It operates in another way, because "the rule is different, but there is a rule" (ibid.). What is important, therefore, is to make a clear distinction between the "aristocratic notion of subjugation" and the "democratic notion of obedience" (Tocqueville 2000: 551). Democratic obedience entails a morality in the eyes of the one who obeys. While it is not a "divine obligation" it is not considered as degrading because it is supposed to be chosen freely

and adopted temporarily. There is always the chance to do something else in the future, because what is important is the individual, not the hierarchical system[21]. Obedient people appreciate the advantages of servitude: they are not required to love their bosses. In a very "post-bureaucratic manner", Tocqueville adds that the servants "are not sure that they should not be the masters and they are disposed to consider whoever commands them as the unjust usurper of their right" (Tocqueville 2000: 553), in an argument reminiscent of Ackoff (1999: 180).

The hierarchical relationship that derives from this conception is often difficult, full of struggles, rivalry, and suspicion about "who has the right to do what". The boss is malevolent and mild, the subordinate malevolent and intractable (Tocqueville 2000: 553). And then, some sort of constraining administration is likely to appear suddenly to give specific guidelines stipulating clearly to each "what he is, what he can do, or what he should do" (Tocqueville 2000: 553), namely, *bureaucracy*, under the auspices of a powerful *oligarchy*.

For Tocqueville, bureaucracy solves democracy's problem of order: it enables power-assisted steering of the associations that form between people in the civil and market sphere, thus holding at bay the potential for anarchy that arises from the combination of the market and democracy. Occasional sovereignty in the matter of elections and apparently perpetual sovereignty in the matter of markets are tamed through the everyday experience of bureaucracy.

The power of equality

Tocqueville's analysis of the power of equality uncovers the reason bureaucracy is able to reappear behind democratic settings. Paradoxically, the power of bureaucracies could also be

due to the strength of certain types of beliefs and feelings toward two basic principles of democracies: equality and freedom. According to Tocqueville, people have "a much more ardent and tenacious love for equality than for freedom" (Tocqueville 2000: 479). Freedom, as the result of equality, is the deepest sense of democratic ideals: "men will be perfectly free because they will all be entirely equal; and they will all be perfectly equal because they will be entirely free" (ibid.). The reign of equality as a dominant fact and belief of democratic societies and organisations is very hard to undermine, as many central features of the organizations concerned would have to be modified: laws and rules would have to be abolished, core ideas, goals and ends renewed, and the habits of members changed.

The power of bureaucracies derives partly from the deeply embedded belief that the principle of equality before the rules, the core ideal of bureaucracy, will last forever. There is faith in its lasting stability, and in the resulting tranquillity of people against any external and internal changes they may observe and experience (the gratitude of the masses for the oligarchs in Michels' terms). In short, to quote Tocqueville once more, the difference between freedom and equality in people's minds is that "from time to time, political freedom gives a certain number of citizens sublime pleasures. Equality furnishes a multitude of little enjoyments daily to each man. The charms of equality are felt at all moments, and they are within the reach of all" (Tocqueville 2000: 481). Thus, the taste for equality is shared by everyone and strengthens the cohesion of the entire community: there is no need to know the other members individually and personally, as there is a trust in the power and effective presence of equality. No effort is required to obtain the pleasures brought by equality. And this is a passion at the heart of democracy, and the major common point with some bureaucratic ideals.

For Tocqueville, the passion for equality may be a trap; one which might lead democracies to tolerate poverty or enslavement as coexistent with rhetorical equality. Equality and simultaneous deference to the power of the majority may create a specific principle of obedience to the democratic laws. Nobody can really contest the laws and rules of democratic systems, as they have, in theory, been elaborated through the will of the people. Everyone is supposed to be an equal elector and therefore, if someone decides to attack the rules, he must "either change the opinion of the nation or ride roughshod over its will" (Tocqueville 2000: 230). Compliance to the rules is thus obtained both thanks to the political resignation of people confronted with the power of the majority, as well as thanks to the fact that this compliance is part of a contract viewed as a necessary and lesser evil than disorder.

According to Tocqueville, democratic power proceeds through soft constraints. It never uses violence and force but more sophisticated means of attaining individual identity and the sense of being part of a community. Escaping from democratic rules implies exclusion from a given community, and to be progressively or suddenly isolated. The power that dominates operates through the self-adoration of the majority, the "empire of the majority", from which it becomes difficult to salvage individual freedom of mind. Bureaucratic administrations protect people from the empire that, albeit unconsciously, they help to establish, by creating a distance between the organization and members through de-personalizing the employment relationship.

Political centralization and the power of bureaucracy

Should we admit that bureaucracy is a type of "administrative tyranny", descending into the more specific details of the execution of laws? This is the type of criticism that has often been aimed at the administrative centralization implied by bureaucracy. To Tocqueville, democracy

combined with administrative centralization and rule-based tyranny is not acceptable because it could give way to a centralized despotic regime. Or on the other hand, should we state with Tocqueville that the very dynamic of democracy is to produce specific forms of despotism? If we take this second position, we argue that bureaucracy may appear as the only possible bulwark against the threat of tyrannical systems of government.

Tocqueville argues that under democratic regimes, the most probable course of political evolution is towards the pre-eminence of a single central power and uniform legislation "as the first condition of a good government" (Tocqueville 2000: 641). The individual has far less power than society because the system has more enlightenment than any of the individuals who compose it. The individual appreciates being guided by a system that shows the right course for everyone to follow. Thus, democracy tends to evolve toward a system where a centralized social power, unique and ubiquitous, constantly acts to create uniform rules applicable to and acceptable by everyone. People in democracies tend to conceive of the government "in the image of a lone, simple, providential and creative power" (Tocqueville 2000: 642), which brings them to accept, even request, its concentration. It is also, according to Tocqueville, because people in democratic regimes are very active, disseminate their efforts in multiple directions, and have no time remaining for political life. Therefore, the political government and administration enlarges its sphere of action continuously: "a democratic government therefore increases its prerogatives by the sole fact that it endures …it becomes all the more centralized as democratic society gets older" (Tocqueville 2000: 644).

Every central government "loves equality" and "adores uniformity" (645), and democratic people, if they often "hate the depositories of the central power (…) always love this power in itself" (ibid.). Political centralization becomes a necessary fact, as individual servitude tends

to grow at the same time, "owing to ignorance" (Tocqueville 2000: 648). The similarities to bureaucracy are evident and well-illustrated by the following quotation: "The administrative power of the state constantly spreads because no one but it is skilled enough to administer" (Tocqueville 2000: 648). It is thus expertise that determines who governs. Centralization is also particularly rapid and uncontrollable in contexts "whose existence can often be put in peril" (649). It is not surprising that the metaphysics of battling with uncertainty are as popular as they are with business leaders who tend to insist so much on the dangers and external perils surrounding the organization's survival. It is a means for justifying the growing prerogatives of central powers.

The disappearance of local authorities representing potential intermediary powers is another reason for the growing importance of central power. This provides an interesting analogy to the post-bureaucratic extinction of intermediary hierarchical supervisors which, if we agree with Tocqueville, does not give more autonomy and discretion to individuals, but rather more prerogatives to the central elites of experts and managers (Tocqueville 2000: 652-653). Consequently, administration depends on the same power, but is also "compressed more and more in the same place and is concentrated in fewer hands" (654). The progressive and political transformation of democracy into oligarchy not only affects the establishment and division of social and administrative power. To Tocqueville, it also has dramatic consequences for the whole political regime. A certain type of oppression threatens democratic people:

> "I see an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who revolve on themselves
> without repose … Each of them, withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny
> of all the others … he is beside them, but he does not see them; he touches them and
> does not feel them … Above these an immense tutelary power is elevated, which
> alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate. It is

absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild … the sovereign extends its arms over

society as a whole; it covers its surface with a network of small, complicated,

painstaking, uniform rules through which the most original minds and the most

vigorous souls cannot clear a way to surpass the crowd … it does not destroy, it

prevents things from being born; it does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises,

enervates, extinguishes, dazes…" (Tocqueville 2000: 663).

The quote illuminates the type of hybrids potentially resulting from some neo-democratic forms of freedom entailed by post-bureaucratic models of management. The co-existence of "mild despotism" and "peaceful servitude", he suggests, "could be combined better than one imagines with some of the external forms of freedom … established in the very shadow of the sovereignty of the people" (Tocqueville 2000: 663-664).

In short, the political hybrids produced by apparently strange and unexpected combinations of bureaucratic and democratic principles are the direct consequence not only of the political ambivalence of systems but also of organizational members, who "feel the need to be led and the wish to be free" (664). The accommodation of people to this compromise is the most probable configuration for organizations to take these days. Soft bureaucracy is the figure behind this hybrid: there are numerous bridges between administrative despotism and the freedom of individuals to make their own way within organizations. In fact, this is perhaps the "least bad" political formula for contemporary organizations, as it is largely preferable to either the depositing of powers in the hands of incompetent managers, or to an apparent "absence of power differentials" which could lead to organizational anarchy governed by opaque and disordered criteria.

Let us summarize the hybridizing mechanisms unveiled by Michels and Tocqueville in the following table (table 1)

Table 1: The perpetuation of oligarchies: comparing Michels and Tocqueville

Michels	Tocqueville
- Dialectic of elite [fragmentation-unification] - Nurseries of sub-oligarchies - Destabilization of local orderings through sub-oligarchs' circulation - Professionalization of leaders - Political indifference and apathy of the governed	- Ambivalence of democratic hierarchies: contractual temporary connections + the hope to become master - Uncertain feelings between equality and sharp differentiation [Circulation of people-stability of government]

To have a more concrete view of some of these mechanisms, we will now take the example of project management as a typical element of the hybrid political dynamics leading to the perpetuation of the oligarchic bureaucratic political structure of the organization.

Project Management: contemporary hybrids in action

Recent management writers have seen project management as a circuit breaker for bureaucracy, and have contrasted the bureaucratic past with the future of a project-based post-modern world (Clegg 1990). Elements of empowerment, self-reliance, trust and peer-based teamwork controls (Barker 1999) are supposed to portray project-management as an explicit and concrete appeal to post-modern/post-bureaucratic organizations. But is post-bureaucracy post-politics? We think not. We argue in this last part that the political dynamics suggested above apply equally to project-management as an example of the discrepancy between managerial innovations and the possibility of transforming the political structure of the organization. Let us briefly examine the different dynamics.

Our first argument is that a hybrid political structure needs both elite differentiation to ensure a credible competition among various centres of power (individuals and/or sub-groups), and elite unification to ensure a relative consensus on basic values and on the legitimate rules of the internal political arena. So hybridization, in the context of business organizations, necessarily implies an intermediary design. It separates elite from sub-elite members and

distinguishes the former from the necessary minimal similarity of the latter population, with regard to values, demographic characteristics and types of aspirations.

Project management is one of the technologies used to design hybrid political structures, for at least two major reasons. First, project management encompasses both a principle of selection and a principle of education. Selection mechanisms are used to enhance the circulation as well as rivalries among sub-elite members (namely would-be project managers and actual project managers), while facilitating the control by incumbent oligarchs over local orderings (through appointments of new project leaders, circulation of experts among projects, "go/no go" decisions at certain critical steps of the projects…). Education mechanisms are used to create what Mills terms the "fraternity of the chosen" (1957: 143). In other words, project management can be viewed as a technology helping to create and sustain diffuse networks of acquaintanceship between "professionals", that legitimates "educational nurseries" in which project managers learn both the basics of the official body of knowledge, as well as a feel for those underlying values whose meaning they have to decipher (such as those values pertaining to "what is important to succeed in this place"),. Eventually, such learning helps the development of "leadership professionalization" in Michels' sense. The culture of leadership generated through project management combines Michels and Tocqueville's perspectives highlighted in table 1, as the leaders who are likely to be "produced" through project management will be individuals who:

- Understand the necessity of going beyond the standard project management technical body of knowledge in order to be recognized as would-be leaders
- Share a common view of the "politics of career", i.e. of the necessary stepping stones and filters to the top

- Aspire to common ambitions and the necessity of being "always" temporarily connected to people and projects.

The diffusion of a hybrid, comprising a culture of ambition and circulation, sustains the stability of central governmentality. Project management illuminates the fact that the management of sub-elite is, as Michels put it, the central tenet of elite perpetuation. Corporate leaders have a direct interest in shaping, grooming and educating selected aspirants, constituting what Foucault might have called subjects with an appropriate comportment, etiquette, and equi to qualify as disciplined. The question is not to know whether being a project manager constitutes a guarantee that one will be tagged as a would-be leader. Such is obviously not the case. Being made a project manager merely hints, in a weak sign, that oligarchs have spotted somebody and wish to test out certain indispensable characteristics. Mostly, these characteristics pertain to an ability to accept and work creatively with an existing order and existing rules; thus, they go far beyond merely technical and professional expertise.

The second argument relates to the features of the project management "profession" itself. Wilensky's defines (1964: 138) a profession, using two criteria: "1) The job of the professional is *technical*-based on systematic knowledge or doctrine acquired only through long prescribed training 2) The professional man adheres to a set of *professional norms*". . In our view, project management combines "pure" professional features, such as the existence of external rules of expertise, of external associations, of official systems of accreditation, of an official body of knowledge…) with organizational kinds of norms and values. It is this, we argue, which necessarily makes project management a professional hybrid. Project management professionalization serves as a resource for business leaders to compare and

judge future would-be leaders, a metric for gauging the level of ambition of pre-selected individuals. Project management thus constitutes a springboard for those who shrewdly avoid being pegged as "true professionals", with the cosmopolitan and organizationally disinterested pose that this can imply. The power of organizational values, which are epitomized by incumbent leaders, renders the distinction between "true professionals" and "would-be oligarchs" in terms of internal mechanisms of selection and education. One should not be viewed merely as an expert in project management if one aspires to be one of the chosen few, but should be seen as someone equipped to move between the interest of the project and the interests of the centre. In a very Tocquevillean manner, the hybridization between exogenous institutions (stabilizing the professional body) and endogenous political dynamics (enhancing the circulation of values, the diffusion of ambitions and the creation of a culture of precariousness among sub-elite members) is a mechanism that helps to generate stability in the political structure.

To go a step further, still following Michels and Tocqueville's analyses, we argue that project management directly influences elite power structures in contemporary organizations for three major reasons. First, it facilitates the shaping of "class cleavages" inside the expert body of project managers, between those likely to be able to aspire further and those who have reached their personal "glass ceiling". The latter will end up either specializing in project management or going back to their initial working environment. Project management therefore helps differentiate some "chosen few" inside a diffuse group of pre-elected individuals that are shrewdly scattered throughout the organizational body (mostly through the choice of project leaders and the segmentation of the internal "breeding ground" of future compliant sub-oligarchs, the management and control of key projects, and the circulation of experts and team leaders). Second, the enactments that is project management provides business oligarchs with

arguments for "going over the head" of project leaders, thus signalling that the oligarchs are officially (bureaucratically) vested with the power to stabilize or destabilize what project teams do, through different kinds of decisions (such as resource allocation, project termination, team leaders demotion/promotion…). That they are able to do this sometimes happens iorrespective of what "purely" professional criteria and rules (as they are explicated in the official "bibles" of project management) might propose. Oligarchs dispose: they do not propose merely to follow what the project body of knowledge legitimates. Third, project management both creates more complex elite strata to traverse and enables a route of social mobility within the organization. Project management is a relatively diffused and stratified body: decisions regarding careers discriminate the "good" from the "not quite good enough", based on the transparency of project performance amongst the subaltern elite. Accordingly, the generation of an elitist culture stems, in part, from the acceptance by would-be leaders of the inevitability of this fragmentation as well as its legitimacy. As Tocqueville suggested, the core aspect of a democratic culture might be the diffusion of a common aspiration, "one day", to become a master. Masters, in organizational terms are the oligarchs not the project managers. It is this which is the basis of the legitimacy of oligarchs' choices: they engineer a kind of elitist-democratic culture through competition in the social technologies of project management. After all, the stability of democratic regimes is founded in part on the quality of the elected leaders, thus on the quality of the selection and educational processes.

Project management is a "classic" hybrid: it illuminates how one might reconcile pluralist-democratic views of elite production (anybody can legitimately aspire to reach the circles of power) and oligarchic views (that, in practice, only a limited proportion of people can constitute the "chosen few"). In the context of organizations elite production that does not combine the two faces of this process proves, if not impossible *per se*, at least a hindrance to

the understanding of the full complexity of the hybrid. It also sheds light on a peculiar combination of collegial-technical forms of institutionalization, through the constitution of a well-defined body of knowledge (Hodgson 2002), with bureaucratic-administrative forms of control, which aims to impede the potential, inside intermediate bodies, of "circles of contestation" arising. Finally, as Tocqueville suggested, it is the circulation of people (especially key people), which provides the governors with the resources to stabilize and perpetuate similar structures of power and government over time. From the moment the circulation of sub-elite is monitored from the centre of the organization, it is a means of first, producing knowledge through the diversity of individual experiences; second, disseminating a powerful network of shared values regarding career and ambition which also facilitate the activation and embodiment of common reference points that structure the attention and commitment of project members. Such reference points include milestones, key performance indicators, profit-margins, annual performance, respect for deadlines, respect for budgets, deference to which is progressively internalised as incontrovertible business *and* moral values, essential for the healthy survival of the entire organization (Courpasson and Dany 2003). These reference points strengthen the regime through weaving the social fabric of allegiance for would-be leaders.

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to suggest that the added value of analyzing the political mechanism of elite perpetuation in contemporary business firms is twofold: first, it sheds fresh light on social-managerial technologies such as project management, highlighting their paradoxical political influence in perpetuating and stabilizing power structures in

organizations. Hitherto, these types of new "forms" have mostly been praised for their impact on the flexibility and plasticity of organizations. Second, it helps move the study of new forms from a "pure" organizational design perspective to one that is political, demonstrating that the evolution of organizational forms affects the stability of elite power as much as the adaptability and performance of the firm. To put it differently, we argue the urgency of research on the idea of "political performance" (see Eckstein 1969). In the paper we have suggested that one of the ingredients of the political performance of business organizations is to "engineer" hybrid regimes, such as the "despotic democracy", that Tocqueville feared two centuries ago. The hybridity of political regimes derives from a "circulative" organization, based on competitive mechanisms, monitored from the centre by a circle of powerful leaders, shifting groups of experts about who have to display high degrees of allegiance, even as their project engagements constantly lead them to both necessarily transgress, while still having to champion, purely intraorganizational calculations constituted from within the boundaries, in their everyday traverse of the margins of their organization.

We have also suggested that to analyze bureaucratic transformation and reproduction one has to abandon ideal types, not in favour of a concern with the respective efficiency of organizational models but for a concern with the political stability of business firms. Current bureaucracies have little to do with any essential features of the ideal type that Weber bequeathed to us — as Martindale (1960) says, the destiny of such models will always the scrapheap. Put another way, organizations should be seen as political regimes rather more than as functionally efficient arrangements. When scholars grapple with the demise or refurbishment of bureaucracy, the central icon of organization studies, its essential abstract concept and ideal type, they should recall the opposition between democracy and despotism in Tocquevillean terms, or between closed hegemonies and

polyarchies in Dahl's terms (1971: 7). What differentiates concrete instances of bureaucracy is its capacity to adapt to different kinds of political regimes. Behind the scenes, oligarchies perpetuate themselves as the major regime of power distribution. Gouldner was thus right in dealing with the question of the political background instead of accumulating invariably controversial evidence on the comparative efficiency of alternative models. We would do well to remember his unique contributions to the corpus of knowledge.

The evolution of democratic systems towards "mild despotic" regimes is at the very heart of the post-bureaucratic critique. Its importance has to be addressed to illuminate how far soft bureaucracy can be a political and organizational form serving as a functional and moral compromise between apparently opposite political regimes. Ultimately, we must ask whether the continued power of actual bureaucracies is due to the unexpected validity of contested oligarchies (Courpasson 2004) or because of "competitive oligarchies" (Dahl 1971) serving as central political regimes in the contemporary business world?

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