COMPLEX ORGANISATIONS AND CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

This issue celebrates the publication of the 3rd edition of Charles Perrow’s *Complex Organisations: A Critical Essay* (1986). In this article, I will explore its relevance for the study of today’s public sector organisations, which are of especial interest to this journal’s readers. The world may have changed since 1986. We were still then without the internet or mobile phones but with the Soviet Union and the Berlin Wall (at least for a few more years). But remember: then Reagan; now George W. Bush. Then “greed is good”; now Enron. So there may be continuity as well as change in both the political and intellectual climate. The revival of deregulated capitalism already detectable in the mid-1980s has continued apace, with its organisational correlates. Some of the major public sector reform ideas of the 1980s have displayed surprising resilience and have “stuck” internationally (Ferlie, Lynn et al. 2005). The public sector “managerial reform” bubble has stubbornly refused to burst.

Perrow essentially paints a world of “late modernity” where large organisations, and notably bureaucracies, are dominant in economic and social life, replacing local and informal modes of organising. It seems that market forces have been tamed and are not strong enough to disturb a world of cartels and oligopolies. He champions the fruitfulness of the academic discipline of organisational studies in analysing such a world of large and stable organisations:

“organisational analysis has grown in depth, breadth, self criticism and sophistication over the twenty five years I have observed it. In 1960 most of the important topics for the field came from other, more well developed fields. Today I believe the reverse is true: we are exporting ideas, data, and topics to psychology, social psychology, political science, and even economics more than we are importing them.” (preface, vii)
While it is clearly correct to suggest the potential fruitfulness of an organisational perspective in analysing current public sector organisations, a key question is whether the range of organisational forms has broadened significantly since the mid-1980s beyond the large bureaucratic form assumed by Perrow, perhaps linked to the revival of market forces or (in the public sector) strengthened political direction. In addition, are such statements too tribal, in a world increasingly characterised by multi-disciplinarity?

This article will first of all outline the author's understanding of Perrow's core argument. It will then pose some questions about its continuing relevance in today's public sector organisations. Is Perrow's organisational model of a power-centred bureaucratic form enduring? Have new organisational forms appeared within the public sector? Do we need to develop different theories of power from the zero-sum model of power employed by Perrow?

I need to declare some affiliations at this point. First, this paper represents a view from the United Kingdom, rather than the United States. How important is this geographic relocation? The comment is often made that American authors are ethnocentric in their writing, but this does not apply to Perrow. While many of his references are American, he starts and finishes with Max Weber and also in between references some British (Woodward, Child), French (Crozier), and Scandinavian School (March and Olsen) writers. Here is an American writer who can travel. His structuralist and power-centric analysis is more typically European than American, and he rejects the pluralist model of power associated with much American writing. Nevertheless, a cross-Atlantic perspective will add something. We are closer to approaches such as postmodernism and post-structuralism which have become more important over the last 20 years. Substantively, we have a significantly larger public sector than America (e.g., in health care) with a larger range of public sector management sites from which empirical data can be derived against which to test theories. These sites have been subjected to strong, top-down reform drives as politicians (e.g., Thatcher, Blair) have sought to increase their political control over the machinery of government as a key power resource.

Secondly, I write from within a management school with a particular interest in public management rather than as an organisational sociologist located in a sociology department. This paper therefore will explore the contribution of Complex Organisations specifically from a public sector management perspective. Unsurprisingly, one point of discussion will be Perrow's bleak characterisation of management as "the masters" and his preference for considering the role of structure rather than action (or even, dare one use the term, leadership). Normatively, I hold more optimistic assumptions about the potentially creative, collaborative, and even ethical role of management in the public services than Perrow, including a greater attachment to a non-zero-sum theory of power.

WHAT KIND OF WORK IS COMPLEX ORGANISATIONS?

First of all, what kind of work is Complex Organisations: A Critical Essay? It is a monograph rather than the conventional short article. In an academic world now
dominated by marketable "hits" in key journals, book writing may seem an old-fashioned luxury. Yet it reminds us of the enduring power of a good book with space to develop broad arguments. Perrow was able to refine his argument in successive editions; for example, increasing the space devoted to economic theories of organisation as they became more influential in the 1980s.

It is secondly indeed a critical essay in the sense that Perrow reviews and critiques a number of alternative schools of organisational analysis before advancing his own preferred approach. The work of these schools is introduced on a historical basis. The work offers a broad synthesis and critique rather than a detailed presentation of primary data. It organises a large, disparate, and indeed disputatious field and supplies an overall interpretation and agenda for future scholarly work.

Thirdly, this is a value-committed rather than "neutral" or highly technical form of social science writing. Unlike in much American management research, we have no econometric models, Markov chains, or hypotheses (although there are some descriptive propositions). It reads well and sharply. There is a clear commitment to liberal values in the old-fashioned, leftist sense of liberal. At the time Perrow wrote the third edition to the present day these liberal values have been under political and intellectual attack, and his critical approach falls into a tradition of left liberal American structuralist writing going back to Galbraith, C. Wright Mills, and even Berle and Means. The underlying theme of this tradition of work was that control has replaced ownership and power passed to the higher ranks of the bureaucracy or the "technostructure," rather than the owners of the means of production (or elected politicians in the case of government agencies).

It was written in what was already a cold climate for organisational sociology as it was lumped in with the liberal left by its political opponents. The attacks in the 1980s were pre-eminently from economists and monetarists advancing different assumptions about human conduct and values that were moving with a shift in the macro political and intellectual context. This opposing world view is rejected rather than discussed by Perrow, perhaps because it was just too horrible to contemplate in its entirety. Consequently, Milton Friedman gets too short shrift (p. 221) given his influence, and even Schumpeter's extremely interesting work for organisational theory is not considered in any extended way. The exception to Perrow's oversight of economic theory is his analysis of Williamson's important work on the organisational design implications of Transaction Costs Economics. Perhaps Perrow will take a more extended and perhaps generous view of the potential contribution of organisational economics in a 4th edition?

Having considered the overall tone, we will consider the presentation and sequencing of the key chapters. The discussion starts with the classic Weberian rational legal bureaucratic model in Chapter 1. Here Perrow highlights conventional criticisms of such bureaucratic organisations as being unadaptive and inhumane, and conventional support for greater protection against maladministration or abuse of social power in the bureaucratic model than alternative non-bureaucratic or traditional modes of organising. Office holders are salaried rather than owners of the mode of production and are subject to some notions of due process which may protect against corruption. This is especially important within governmental
organisations. He adds a third criticism of his own: that “bureaucracy is a tool, a social tool that legitimises control of the many by the few, despite the formal apparatus of democracy, and that this control has generated unregulated and unperceived social power” (p. 5). So power here moves from elected politicians or shareholders (supposed principals) to the senior levels of the bureaucratic apparatus (supposed agents that are instead informally principals in their own right). This is a world dominated by large bureaucracies that have displaced other small, local, organisational forms partly because they are more efficient at routine but high volume production (e.g., welfare agencies) at the expense of lower level employees that are little more than “wage slaves” alienated from work. Such large organisations reflect a Weberian rationalisation process taking place across the whole of the economy and society, both in factory-based forms of bureaucracy from the 1750s onwards and indeed in growing government from the nineteenth century as in the Prussian Civil Service that was Weber’s ideal typical example of the bureaucracy.

At the end of Chapter 3, there is an important discussion on the nature of organisational power. The human relations school is criticised for its adherence to “win-win” assumptions based on a non-zero-sum theory of power. Tannenbaum argues that the cooperative and hence effective organisation has more resources, more slack to play with and hence more total power. Yet influence or participation by the workforce on the direction of the organisation is not in Perrow’s view the same as real control.

Various neo-Weberian models are outlined in Chapter 4, which do not contradict the basic Weberian model but rather “bring it up to date” (p. 155) and make it more realistic. From March and Simon, we learn the importance of a wider set of organisational conditions of choice behaviour including bounded rationality, imperfect knowledge, and limited search. Organisations may become dominated by standard operating procedures and routines. From research on basic work technology (Child, Woodward, Hickson) and most notably contingency theory, we learn how the nature of the work undertaken may influence organisational structure, although not to the extent of a reductionist structuralism because of the importance of strategic choice as was later reemphasized by Child. Unobtrusive control mechanisms may also emerge, such as normative or cultural control that critics might call the brainwashing mode of organisational coordination.

He presents a new section on economic theories of organisations (Chapter 7) including agency theory where there are principals, agents, and conditions of moral hazard that are handled in the design of contracts and incentives (e.g., CEOs’ stock options should align their incentive structures with those of the shareholders who are supposed to be principals). He then discusses transaction costs economics, particularly associated with the work of Williamson. Williamson, like Perrow, is concerned with the conditions that have given rise to large organisations: why is it that hierarchies have replaced markets? On page 223, he notes, “Economists see life as an endless series of contracts and analyse organisations as such.” From this viewpoint, efficiency criteria force the choice between markets, hierarchies, and networks, although Perrow sees efficiency criteria as only one explanation for industry structure, and possibly a modest one.

Chapter 8 is a critical concluding chapter that develops a power-centric analysis of organisations as bureaucracies within a neo-Weberian framework. Perrow starts by outlining
his basic theory of power (pp 258–259). Tannenbaum’s non-zero-sum theory of power referred to earlier is seen as a subcategory of power, albeit an important and useful one. More generally, organisations facilitate the production of zero-sum power where:

“power is the ability of persons and groups to extract for themselves valued outputs from a system in which other persons or groups either seek the same outputs for themselves or would prefer to expend their effort towards other outputs. Power is exercised to alter the initial distribution of outputs, to establish an unequal distribution or to change the outputs. We could put it in terms of goals: there is a struggle over either the content of the output or the distribution of it. This is a “power over” rather than a “power with” view; it deals with the type of pie and division of the pie, not its size.” (p. 259)

Perrow’s definition of power is thus zero-sum, relational, exercised both inside and outside the organisation, and concerns an output of organised activity that is both valued and produced at some cost (p. 259). Perrow’s later argument follows from this attachment to a zero sum model of power.

First, “an organisation is a tool that masters use to generate valued outputs that they can then appropriate. The most essential theory to explicate this is bureaucratic theory”(p. 260), which is based on hierarchy and imperative coordination. Note the use of the hard-edged word “masters,” here referring to an organisational elite that is appropriating the surplus of the workforce. While Weberian bureaucratic theory is seen as the single most essential element of a theory of organisations, it is given a conflictual, almost Marxist, tinge.

His clarion call in the last page summarises his intellectual project:

“Then join with me in the difficult task of rewriting the history of bureaucracy with an expanded vision of the environment and externalities. I believe that a power theory of organisations—starting with a solid rock of bureaucracy, modified by bounded rationality and considerations of internal and external group interests, extended to networks and sectors that include the State, and closely attentive to externalities (the costs borne by the weaker members of society)—will show the way. It will be an organisational analysis all the way, because it is through organisations (at least since the time of Josiah Wedgwood) that classes are constituted and reproduced, stratification systems created and stabilised (and changed in some cases), political processes tamed and guided, and culture itself shaped and molded.” (p. 278)

**PERROW’S CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE TO PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS**

Perrow developed a power-led and bureaucratic model of organisational analysis, originally in the 1970s and expanded in the 1980s. It is sociologically derived and
highly structural in tone. There is little here on the role of individual actors. Does it retain validity today or have empirical conditions changed and persuasive alternative organisational theoretical explanations developed? What in particular is its contribution to understanding contemporary public sector organisational forms?

From Bureaucratic Modes of Organisation and Governance?

The first question is whether (or not) the last 20 years have witnessed a transition away from the neo-Weberian bureaucratic mode of organisational governance assumed by Perrow. This is not necessarily to advocate such a shift; the legitimacy advantages of the bureaucratic form may be considerable. Instead it is an empirical question of whether it is occurring, and, if so, what is driving it?

One view is that a macro organisational transition (Pettigrew and Fenton 2000; Pettigrew, Whittington et al. 2003) may be occurring from a vertical and well integrated governance mode within large private sector organisations (the so-called multi-divisional or M form) towards a new horizontal and diffuse form (the network or N form). The N form includes core features such as radical decentralisation to operating units, flattened organisational hierarchies, restricted head office roles, and more elaborate lateral communication networks. In the public sector (Newman 2001), similar shifts may be occurring towards more diffuse and complex governance modes based on interorganisational networks to cope with “wicked problems,” which cross functional boundaries. Political scientists (Rhodes 1997) argue that the traditional nation state is “hollowing out,” with functions moving down to regions or stand-alone agencies and up to supranational authorities (such as the European Union or United Nations). Network-based modes of governance are emerging instead. So the traditional command centre of government (the heartland of the Weberian model) may be losing the capacity to ensure imperative forms of coordination.

For example, the UK government has privatised both its old national airline British Airways (BA) and its airports such as Heathrow, now owned by the separate British Airports Authority (BAA). The handling of security issues at Heathrow at the time of writing (August 2006), following the arrest of a number of terrorist suspects, led to a dispute between the airline and Heathrow management about who was to be blamed for long passenger queues. BA argued delays could have been minimised by better management on the part of the airport authority. Disintegration of previously unified public sector ownership led to a public debate about who should be doing what even in a politically sensitive matter of national security.

The Emergence of Postmodern Perspectives on Public Organisations

Emergent postmodern perspectives on public sector organisations stress their fragmented rather than integrated nature (Bogason 2005). From this perspective, Marx, Durkheim and Weber can all be seen as the high priests of modernity. Modernity (Bogason 2005, 236) is characterised by processes of rationalisation, centralisation, specialisation, and bureaucratisation (just as described by Weber). Postmodern organisational conditions are by contrast characterised by conditions of fragmentation.
and mark a rejection of the Weberian form. There are trends to decentralisation, individualisation, and internationalisation, which are evident in the domain of governments as well as firms. Within the postmodern viewpoint, a focus on production gives way to a focus on consumption and the bureaucratic form gives way to the “adhocracy.” This would suggest a switch from focus from the study of workers in public organisations (such as civil servants) to the experience of users of public services, as seen from their own eyes. Themes and theories of democratic governance, links with the public, interaction with clients become more important. In addition, the forms and goals of theory generated in this approach are likely to be more subjectivist, situated, and normatively committed to helping the weak than traditional grand social theory. In comparison to the postmodern model, Perrow’s work is a classic of late modernity, save that Perrow is also normatively committed to helping the weak against the strong.

Other Challenges to the Model of the Powerful Public Sector Bureaucracy

Putting aside the challenges to Perrow’s theory from postmodernist principles, there is also substantial variation in public sector organisations that does not fit easily within the narrow range of forms considered by Perrow. His focus is on the powerful bureaucracy with deep control over organisation members, but this is a form found in only some public sector organisations. I will give three brief examples of alternatives to his model of the powerful public sector bureaucracy.

The first observation springs from the observation that there is a limited degree of top-down control found within many public bureaucracies in practice. Perrow most often argues that the bureaucratic form exerts real and powerful control on lower level participants, yet he concedes there may be contest from below. The possibility of lower level resistance stems in his view from the limits of rational decision making suggested by March and Simon. This bounded rationality creates indeterminacy of workload and thus capacity for some discretion down below. Some empirical research, however, shows even less control than Perrow assumes. The high discretionaty power of “street level bureaucrats” in welfare agencies found by Lipsky (1980) is one important empirical study that draws attention to the relatively modest role of the top. Furthermore, some bureaucratic processes and “control mechanisms” in the public sector should be seen essentially as ritualistic and indeed require higher and lower level participants to collude in successfully performing such ritual.

In the UK context, recent academic work from social accounting (Power 1997) sees the steady growth of audit systems as an accounting logic increasingly colonizes the public sector as trust in public services professionals declines. Power finds, however, that these systems are “rituals of verification,” which have few substantive effects apart from offering cosmetic reassurance to a worried public. In Gouldner’s (1954) terminology, this is a “mock bureaucracy” where rules generated from outside (e.g., a no smoking rule) are routinely ignored by both sides internally and cause little conflict between them. Such processes of mock bureaucracy are evident in contemporary UK public service settings such as the introduction of consultant clinician appraisal in the National Health Service (McGivern and Ferlie 2006).
Secondly, Perrow’s discussion of the role of professionals within large bureaucracies is limited because he argues too simply that they are usually aligned in their interests with the organisational hierarchy (pp 42–46), drawing on the example of scientists in large firms (e.g., bio pharma). He acknowledges that the autonomous role of professionals is potentially an increasingly important limitation of his model given the growth of knowledge-based organisations, but does not develop it further, even given the empirical examples of divergent interest by professionals. What about the role of doctors within large public bureaucracies such as hospitals? Surely the organisational role of physicians is not solely aligned with bureaucratic and managerial interests (to put it mildly), and this is perhaps the ideal typical elite profession that is of great importance in American society. We have to concede that this is a vast and controversial topic and there is some movement in the literature away from the old model of professional dominance (Freidson 1970) towards newer models which stress greater managerial control over clinicians’ working practices, strategically if not yet operationally (Ferlie, Ashburner et al. 1996). Yet there certainly needs to be more considered analysis of the extent to which contemporary professionals working in large public service organisations are successful in retaining some autonomy and control over day to day working practices even against the hierarchy (Ackroyd 1996). Other “new professionals,” such as management consultants and IT workers, may move across governmental organisations from one project to another and not engage in any sustained relationship with the hierarchy of the organisation in which they are temporarily working.

Third, there seems to be a debureaucratisation process as well as a bureaucratisation process now evident within governmental agencies where the policy intention is to create more individualised, responsive, and citizen-centred public services. This is now leading to serious attempts to move away from classic public sector bureaucracies as the dominant organisational form, although the extent of such movement is open to question. Efficiency in mass production has perhaps become less important as a policy goal than flexibility and responsiveness for governmental service agencies. This requires the development of “looser” and more user-centred forms of organisation and management. One hope for the so-called New Public Management reforms (Ferlie, Ashburner et al. 1996; Meier and Hill 2005) of the 1980s and 1990s was that they would lead to the emergence of “can do” public managers who would shift public agencies towards a service orientation. Structurally, they would be loosely accountable by contract rather than through hierarchy as the strategic core of government disaggregated from direct control over operational agencies. While critics argued that vertical management kept on creeping back in, at least in politically sensitive fields, this was still a significant shift in goals for organising. The introduction of quasi markets in the UK that drew upon economically derived theories of organisational behaviour further reinforced this policy shift towards “customers” in public agencies.

Public sector revitalisation campaigns (such as Vice President Al Gore’s “Reinventing Government” programme in the 1990s in the USA) sought to reduce bureaucracy and design more entrepreneurial public organisations (Barzelay 1992) where lower level workers are consulted and empowered to take initiative. There
is empirical evidence that some of these initiatives have had more than cosmetic effect (see Kelman 2005, on American procurement reform). These new "post bureaucratic" modes of working have been reinforced by the plethora of total quality programmes from Japanese rather than Western modes of firm management. Process reengineering and service design techniques have been deliberately imported into the public sector over the last 20 years in an attempt to "speed up" slow moving public bureaucracies and make them more externally focussed. Critics may argue that the effects of these programmes have been cosmetic or merely symbolic, but they are interesting and possibly important changes in public sector organisations that need to be considered more fully.

Finally, we should not assume that public services will always be delivered through large public sector bureaucracies. Just as there has been a growth of small firms within the private sector over the last 20 years, so we see the rapid emergence of non-state social enterprises such as Non-Governmental Organisations (Smith 2005) funded by the public sector as a delivery arm, which may be organised on a more localised, informal, and value driven basis (e.g., faith based organisations).

THE NATURE AND DISTRIBUTION OF ORGANISATIONAL POWER

The second topic I wish to explore is Perrow's discussion of the nature and distribution of organisational power. His analysis of power marks a welcome change from managerialist analyses that frequently gloss over inequalities and divergent interests between subgroups.

But what kind of theory of power does he employ? His is a structuralist theory of power whereby interest groups have fixed positions (see Alford 1975 for a similar application of structural theory of power to the American health care field). It is based on a zero-sum theory of power where lower-level participants lack control or even upwards influence over the overall shape, strategy, or identity of the organisation. Perrow develops a critique of senior management which he refers to as "masters." He paints a portrait of a bleak, power-led world, directed from the top, without altruism or cooperation. The bottom retains only power to informally resist because of the bounded rationality condition.

Alternative models of behaviour in the public management literature suggest the greater possibility of shared or non-zero-sum power than assumed by Perrow. For instance, Perrow's account of the motivation and behaviour of managers in the public services strikes me as bleak and lacking nuance. Administrators are not always solely motivated to gain power over organisational outputs. Some managerial and professional personnel in public organisations seek a career in the public services as a vocation to pursue more than self interest. There may be senior managers in the public services who take a different view of their leadership role, perhaps drawing on intriguing and ethical notions of "leader as steward" (Senge 1990). While many accounts correctly identify the provider capture of many public agencies, even that is
not always in pursuit of organisational outputs but may be for more diffuse objectives such as gaining social status or other goals.

Moreover, as many social problems fall across agency jurisdictions (e.g., an anti-drugs strategy involves health, education, and criminal justice agencies), it may under some circumstances be rational for public agencies to pool their resources and cooperate. Here a strategy of "cooperative advantage" (Huxham 1996) can emerge as a form of non-zero-sum power which adds public value. Critics might say that these alliances are merely between agency elites and exclude rank and file personnel. However, if taken seriously, managerial techniques such as quality programmes, learning-based organisations, and empowerment programmes do increase the influence (if not control) of rank and file employees on the strategic direction of public agencies.

Perrow's late modern theory of power also needs to take into account the possibility of alternative postmodern and, indeed, ancient theories of power within public organisation. There has been significant development since the mid-1990s in relation to theories of post-structural and postmodern forms of power. If there is ever a 4th edition of Complex Organisations, would this constitute a new Chapter 9? These post-structuralist ideas are particularly associated with the work of Foucault but have been developed further, including at a more applied level of studying actual organisational discourses (Fairclough 1989; Fairclough 1992). Addicott's (2005) review of post-structural theories of power as applied within the health management domain argues that within this perspective (pp 62–68) social "reality" is constructed (rather than reflected) through discourse and discursive practices—that is the way in which language is collectively used and understood. Post-structuralist approaches marginalise traditional material structures and instead focus on the powerful role of discursive practices. Disparate power relations are created not only by what is said (both managers and professionals such as clinicians may be able to create esoteric languages that exclude the laity from participation), but also who has access to different discourses and the power to determine such access. Fairclough suggests that Foucault may overemphasise the immutable power of discourse and underestimate the possibility that dominated groups may resist or challenge hegemonic discourse (the elite dominance vs. pluralism controversy thus resurfaces in a discursive arena).

Under some circumstances, ancient charismatic forms of authority may replace the traditional bureaucratic role authority assumed by Perrow, even within government agencies. In keeping with his structuralist perspective, Perrow says very little at all about individual leadership and the possible use of charismatic authority. His argument assumes also that such bureaucracies are relatively stable and able to control their market or political environments. Yet the important role for leadership as demonstrated by particular senior individuals within public agencies typically increases in periods of rapid strategic change and restructuring imposed on public agencies by reform-minded politicians. This has become increasingly evident since the 1980s as part of major public sector restructurings. For example, UK educational policy has recently placed much reliance on the appointment of "superheads" and their supposed transformational leadership capacity to turn around chronically failing publicly funded schools.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

British writer Cyril Connolly wrote that “literature is the art of writing something that will be read twice; journalism what will be read once” (Connolly 1938). Using Connolly’s aphorism, Perrow writes literature rather than journalism. Indeed, Perrow has written a major work that continues to stimulate and repay re-reading 20 years after its 3rd edition was published. The first sense in re-reading Perrow is the sheer scholarship, intelligently rather than pedantically providing an extended and magisterial overview. It is a historically aware portrait of a field as it has developed internationally for nearly a hundred years. Nor is it dull stuff—there is a clear set of values, some sharp criticism, and in the end a theoretically informed, power based, and bureaucratic model to which he is committed.

Perrow’s work is above all a scholarly and critical monograph. It is interesting to compare its style with Jeffrey Pfeffer’s book on a similar subject, Managing With Power (1992). Pfeffer exhibits a very different tone, provides more concrete examples but less macro theory (although the book is still rich academic referencing), and a much greater concern for exploring the implications for managerial practice in terms of how managers could fruitfully use the power they had in their practice. We are here in the world of managerial realpolitik. Getting things done, Pfeffer tells us (1992, 343), requires the acquisition and use of power; if you have power, you should know how to use it. Perrow appears less interested in drawing out the implications of his argument for managerial practice. Indeed, there may be relatively few, given his structuralist perspective. This may be positioning the writing too narrowly, however, and missing the opportunity to aid the many genuinely concerned and reflective public managers.

Perrow is surely right when he says that organisational analysis is flourishing as a discipline and offers a useful prism through which contemporary public organisations can be viewed. However, it need not do everything. Organisational economics, social accounting, and political science all provide additional insights that have been alluded to here. So we need to be cautious about any attempts at disciplinary imperialism—even from organisational studies—in what is an increasingly multidisciplinary world. Some of the most interesting questions in contemporary public management studies, such as understanding macro reform processes, management of performance, and accountability regimes, are broad themes that benefit from the perspective of different social science disciplines. This is a stance recently taken by the UK Economic and Social Research Council for its selection of commissioned projects on the public sector.

Two challenges have been posed here to Perrow’s work, at least as seen from the perspective of public management studies. First, have we seen a large-scale transition from a bureaucratic to a post-bureaucratic mode of organising in the public services? Or at least from “strong” to “weak” bureaucratic forms? If so, what theories best explain this shift? This is an important area of controversy where authors differ. It was suggested here that there is evidence of an important shift underway. However, (Meier and Hill 2005) take the other view that the bureaucratic form retains persistence and that stable government will continue to be prized.
Secondly, does Perrow overemphasise a structural and zero-sum theory of organisational power? What about alternative theories of power, perhaps derived from post-structuralism and control over discourse? Is there a greater potential for non-zero-sum power and collaborative behaviour within the public services?

Re-reading Perrow’s book reminds us how important it is that the study of public management is strongly connected to basic social science if public management is to flourish as a scholarly domain as well as a substantive field of practice. Organisational studies represent one of a number of potential academic disciplines on which the public management field can usefully draw—perhaps a prime one—but the search for sound scholarly connections need not be exclusive to any one approach.

REFERENCES


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