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CHAPTER 3

THE POETICS OF MANAGEMENT, AND THE POLITICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURES. A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW ON NPM-REFORMS IN SWITZERLAND

Christoph Maeder

ABSTRACT

New Public Management (NPM) was widely welcomed in the early 1990s of the last century in Switzerland. In accordance with different diagnoses of insufficiency against the public bureaucracies, several NPM programs on all three levels of the Swiss state were launched. But interestingly, most of them did not succeed: they were abandoned, voted down by the electorate, and where they were completed, not much has really changed. So the question from a sociological point of view is, how and why did this happen? To find preliminary answers, NPM is described as a particular professional orthodoxy and confronted with the findings of two ethnographic case studies. What clearly becomes visible is how organizational and professional cultures were neglected by the technical approach of the NPM. This gave way to phenomena like free riding on a reform within the organizations, and in one case to a "fordization" of work resulting in a decrease in workplace quality. If public management

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seeks an impact in the future, it has to account for the culture within organizations more thoroughly and should seek to use context-sensitive language.

INTRODUCTION

In the last 15 years different voices have addressed the need for reform in the public sector in Switzerland. It started with the neo-liberal argument mainly provided by economists pointing to the dangers of steadily growing governmental expenditure, growing tax rates, and the supposed loss of the ability to compete in a global economy due to these factors (Borner, Brunetti, & Straubhaar, 1990). The political sciences on the other hand diagnosed a lack of coherence between political structures and public tasks and the dangers induced hereby, namely the loss of legitimation of policy in general because of the reduced problem solving capacity by the state (Kriesi, 1992). These voices are well-known and broadly distributed through the science and media as well. But only one of them was broadly perceived by the mainstream policy: the economic argument. Hence we have seen widespread cost cutting programs in the public sector for years now on all governmental levels and different kinds of tax cuts as well. On the other hand, it was obviously more or less impossible to reform political, and mainly public service structures in this country basically and essentially. This squeeze between restrictions in public spending and the reluctance to political and administrative reform gave way to a third powerful voice concerning possible action, which intervened at an intermediate organizational level. It was the voice of the management, more precisely the rhetoric of the New Public Management (NPM). By applying concepts stemming from the management of profit organizations to bureaucratic state-run structures, this elocution promised an increase in the efficiency and effectiveness of public spending and administration in general, and was dangling a solution to the above sketched dilemmas (Hablützel & Schedler, 1995; Mastronardi, Schedler, & Brühlmeier, 1998).

Beginning in the second half of the 1990s a growing wave of NPM programs found its way into all levels of governmental spheres under the labels of stylish acronyms like Wirkungsorientierte Verwaltung (WOV or WIF), public management (PUMA), reforms in the canton of grisons (GRIFORMA), and the like. The idea of an increased effectiveness of governmental action and the promise of "de-bureaucratization" was promising and the outlook of this endeavor was widely received and accepted

mainly in the media (e.g. Tages, 1996). Only a few sociologists were openly skeptic (Maeder, 2001; Pelizzari, 2001) and challenged the therapy as too technical on one side (Betz & Nagel, 1999), and too ideologically impregnated on the other (Pellizari, 2001). Today the picture is different. Some of the NPM programs were voted down by the electorate (e.g. cantons of Zurich and Basel), some even never made it to the ballot (e.g. cantons of St. Gallen and Zug). And only a few cities, cantons, and some sectors of the federal administration still adhere to such strategies in public. And nowhere the reforms could demonstrably reduce public spending due to efficiency gains. Even more interesting: The term NPM itself has become a problematic word within large proportion of the administrators on all political levels, and the credibility of the concept has remarkably declined. This can be demonstrated by the use of the term "NPM" itself. Today, it is hardly in use anymore by its promoters, and it has been replaced by the more neutral expression of "Public Management", nothing "new" anymore! So what has happened? Why did the NPM strategies and interventions not really succeed in Switzerland, although the country seemed so willing and ready in the beginning? This is a question of crucial interest not only to me as a sociologist doing research mainly on public organizations like hospitals (Maeder, 2000), prisons (Maeder, 2002), welfare administrations (Maeder & Nadai, 2004a, 2004b), and unemployment programs (Maeder & Nadai, 2006), but also to all the proponents of managerial strategies in the public sector in this country.

In order to understand this process of a decline in credibility, I will ask what kind of shared beliefs are underlying the concepts in use by the NPM managers and what kind of culture did the NPM professionals produce themselves. The emerging cultural model then informs us about what I name here "the poetics of management". In these poetics of management, as we will see, is one central and absolutely crucial idea concerning the topic of organization hardly existing, namely the idea of *organizational and professional culture*. I will argue that the disregard of the politics of existing organizational cultures has led with a high probability to the widespread failure of the well-meant interventions of NPM. And this should be seen as one of the main reasons why NPM in Switzerland did not have the success it was looking for on the organizational level.[1] To illustrate these politics of organizational culture, I will draw on empirical material of one of my own studies on the administration of poverty (Maeder & Nadai, 2004a, 2004b) and the work of a colleague (Bühlmann, 2005), who did research on the effects of NPM in a cantonal administration. In my final considerations, I will center on the question how the new "Public Management" can perform better than the old "NPM" did.

THE POETICS OF MANAGEMENT

Every discipline disposes of a specialized language which serves different and interlinked purposes. First, the language helps to identify the members of the discipline through its competent use. In order to become a member of a certain discipline, we all had to go through different stages of language socialization, namely in our higher education. And although this process never ends, it is clear that by additional social structures like passing tests and receiving diplomas, we finally became members of an academic discipline like management, sociology, economics, and so on. During this process the language created our framework of interpretations, shared by the members of our professional communities. Seen this way, disciplinary and/or professional language can be regarded as an encompassing, complex cultural lexicon of categories, which is a learned and shared resource that structures the perception and creation of reality by its users. And although spoken and written language may not grasp all of what we call culture, it taps a huge portion of it (Keating, 2001). For this reason, it makes sense to take a closer look at the core categories of a certain practice in order to find out, how the central webs of meaning within this practice are woven. These webs of meaning (Geertz, 1973) form the underlying taken for granted infrastructure of the knowledge of a discipline and its corresponding practice and are called the "doxa" or "taken-for-granted truths" of its members. In order to understand such "doxa" of the new public managers in the 1990s in Switzerland, means we have to describe, decipher, and analyze the central categories and concepts used as a managerial orthodoxy of thinking. Basically, this orthodoxy is composed of a cluster of concepts well-known to those, who do or deal with management. Just some of the concepts are: efficiency, effectiveness, customers, products, inputs, outputs, outcomes, strategic and operational tasks or levels, reengineering, outsourcing, performance measuring, performance pay, evaluation, intrapreneurship, and the like. The cultural model[2] which emerges by the use of these terms as a taken-for-granted reality by the managers can be attributed to features as: (a) being very technical and de-contextualized; (b) descending from thinking around the for-profit organizations; (c) aiming at markets rather than bureaucracies; (d) widely ignoring of, and not fitting to local political contexts and finally following some ideological thinking of a wider context. One of the basic pillars of this model is the "entrepreneurial self", like it has been analyzed in the "Governmentality Studies" (Burchell, Gordon, & Miller, 1991). This self is always flexible, disposable, well educated, void of social obligations beyond the job, and willing to take risks

in order to gain his or her chances. It is perfectly adapted to a situation which has been characterized as the now prevailing regime of "The New Spirit of Capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2001). In a nutshell, we can thus say *the poetics of management* provide us with a worldview that assumes a lot of will to improve, to compete, to change, and to adapt to new situations by nearly all the actors involved (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002). Whether this interpretation is a fitting image of the "world out there" in Swiss administrative contexts remains an open question at this point. And that is why we take a look at the cultural dimensions in two concrete organizations, which have been researched ethnographically.

THE POLITICS OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

More than 20 years ago, the concept of organizational culture appeared for the first time in a special issue of the *Administrative Science Quarterly* (Jelinek, Linda, & Paul, 1983; Smircich, 1983) and became known to a wider non-sociological audience. The idea to look at an organization not only in strictly technical and functional terms by challenging the myth of rationality of organizations has widely influenced organizational research ever since (for a developmental overview, see: Burrell & Morgan, 1979; Jones, Moore, & Snyder, 1988; Gellner & Hirsch, 2001; Weeks, 2004). But unfortunately, the proponents of the NPM programs in Switzerland – like many others – only perceived the concept of organizational culture not as a serious idea to be taken into account, and they subsumed it under a label named "soft factors". But because the "soft factors" – in a sociological view – are always firmer and far more rigorous than so called "hard facts" of the managerial "doxa", this labeling could not go without further notice. This neglect or misperception of the culture concept in organizations had most likely very serious consequences for most of the NPM programs in Switzerland. Although the empirical foundation is far from being perfect, because the evaluations done so far are either biased, that is not independently done from the programs interests, or only sporadic and often without the use of qualitative methods, there is some sociological work on NPM reforms available. It can give at least some hints on the probable causes for the loss of momentum of NPM. The arguments will develop around two cases: "The Mapmakers & Clerks – Case" and the "Social Work – Case". Both case studies used a micro-sociological bottom-up approach, and from within the organization. The key questions were: What does NPM mean for the actors and how did they adapt to a reform, which in all cases came to them

top-down and used a language that hitherto has not been used within these public sector organizations. For reasons of space, in this text, we will only sketch out the important arguments of these studies and not fully elaborate them here.

"The Mapmakers & Clerks – Case". In his inspiring study on NPM reforms in a cantonal administration, the author was able to show how the degree of professionalism in an organization influences the outcome of a reform (Bühlmann, 2005). While the highly technical tasks of mapmaking, which require an academic training, were nearly not tangible to reform, the clerk's work in the booths exposed to the public was. The mapmakers' reaction to the reform was very simple and straightforward: they complicated matters for the NPM proponents for so long, until the quest for redefining the work according to the managerial logic was mostly withdrawn. This process of "making things complicated" was pure micro-politics of course. But the mapmakers' knowledge was so highly specialized and needed by the administration that in the end the reform only brought them very slight redefinitions of their work environment, but no substantial change. Here we have a case, where a professional culture had about the same definition power as the reform oriented managerial one. But the latter was functionally not of the same importance. In the end those who "really knew" prevailed, and the reform became mere window dressing in terms of renaming things. A completely different story happened to the clerks with public contacts in the motor vehicle department in the same cantonal administration. They could not rely on superior professional knowledge, or on exclusive capacities really important for their employer. So their workplaces got redefined completely by the managerial logic, and in the end the jobs lost a lot of their workplace quality. Before the reform, the only criterion important for the clerks when handling the public was not to provoke legal cases against the administration by unsatisfied citizens. After the reform they found themselves squeezed in a grid of performance measures and procedural regulations, which cannot be described but as a "fordization" of service work. And of course, their task to avoid legal cases remained. These two cases show us the importance of looking at reforms selectively "bottom-up" and not in a "catch all" and "big bang top-down" way. Depending on the level of professional skills involved, reform processes must be setup accordingly, and we should always be aware of unintentional side effects. If not, a reform can severely impact the work quality without necessarily touching the initial goal of improving the service for the public. In such a case the employees like our clerks will obviously not support the reform anymore and distribute their assessment to others. Taken together,

the reform will not be accepted as an improvement, but be seen as a chicanery of the workforce or an idling circle within the bureaucracy. In sociological terms: the process will loose its legitimation and can only be accomplished by the use of power.

"The Social Work – Case." While doing fieldwork on the administration of poverty (Maeder & Nadai, 2004a, 2004b), we did research in five very different organizations all of which had the same purpose: to provide an entitled population with welfare benefits. In one of the organizations, just recently an NPM program had been introduced under the premises to "de-bureaucratize" the whole welfare apparatus of a canton. The program made sense perfectly to the highest ranks in the organization because they felt that they did not have true control over what was going on "on the ground", and they also were under political pressure to prove that the money they used was distributed efficiently and in an effective way. So what was needed most were input/outcome ratios for the welfare system, namely in the field of poverty. This is not as trivial as it looks, because social work in the welfare administration is a fairly complex and partly a professional activity, in which it is not always easy to define inputs and outcomes (see Maeder & Nadai, 2004a, 2004b). But how were these ratios constructed? After some negotiations between the social workers and the staff of the NPM program, the latter decided that what the social workers proposed was not usable for them, because all these professional categories that the social workers wanted to measure were too complicated to design and the proper data collection to get these information was not possible. So the decision was made that the social workers only should use three categories as input tokens: "counseling", "providing material and financial help", and "other necessary work". Of course the social workers were able to categorize their work accordingly, but this did not make much sense for them. The data produced was considered "useless for us, but satisfying the boss". The same happened to the outcome indicators: while the social workers wanted to use a complex socio-psychological model of well-being and social integration, the NPM program leaders decided to opt for a very simple criterion: how many welfare clients leave the system per unit of time (measured in months). Since the social workers conceived of poverty being a social phenomenon, which only can be partially attributed to their work, they were obviously not satisfied with the indicators they got. The overall consequences of the program were not surprising at all: first the managerial staff was extended, because someone had to take care of all the new, but within the professional sections of organization useless data of the whole canton, and the social workers went back to "normal". And not astonishing anymore: they also

asked for some percents in employment increase due to new the "data stuff". Finally, the only real change which had taken place was the fact that the administration and the social workers used more resources than before, but the resources were not used in the core business of the welfare organization, but in its administration. When we confronted the chief of the whole operation with this diagnosis, he agreed. But he also said, that for him the new data did make sense for two reasons: first, he had something, which he could hand out, when political inquiry set in, and second, he judged the gain in employment of his branch within the larger context of the reform as a success itself. This short example is a good illustration to see the power of organizational culture. The social workers and the program designers had completely different frames of reference: while the social workers expected help for their professional needs, the managers wanted data for legitimation purposes for the top. In the end, we do have a small "clash of cultures" between the rhetoric management and the power of a professional culture. The results cannot be convincing, since the organizational regime and the professional cultures coin the process and the outcomes of the NPM reform. The instrumental logic of coordination of NPM is bypassed by micro-political strategies (Thomas & Davies, 2005); the promises of a de-bureaucratization are only selectively, if at all, realized.

CONCLUSIONS

In Europe, we find many different competing traditions of running a political structure like the French traditions of administration in the ENA (Ecole Nationale d' Administration), the German tradition of the "Staatsverwaltung" like the Prussian model, or the concepts from monarchical Austria, and last but not least, the Swiss model of an extraordinarily fine-grained federalism, just to mention a few. They all address different political and cultural contexts like monarchies, centralized versus non-centralized modes of regulation, direct or indirect democratic rule, and so on. Sociologically, they are homologous insofar as they all develop the particular form of authority or regime called "bureaucracy" according to Max Weber (1972). The term bureaucracy here refers to a particular set of rules in use under such a form of governance, like for instance the principles of law-based decision making, the need for written documentation, the limitation of competency to certain aspects of administrative rule, the way someone comes into office by fair selection, and so on. All these principles hold true for every large

organizational structure that is governments' and businesses' as well. Taken together they form what Weber called the "iron cage dependence" in the modern world which is thoroughly impregnated with bureaucratic rules by the fact that large organizational structures compose a good part of it. And even though bureaucratic regimes are not sexy at all, they are the most stable and sustainable regimes we know. And that is why this cage cannot be left anymore for functional reasons, no matter what managerial technology becomes engaged. In this sense, the rhetoric of NPM in Switzerland was misleading. It first caused public attention and media support, but as soon as the reforms hit the so-called "soft factors" – sociologically organizational and professional cultures – it got stuck and could not achieve. The negligence of these stocks of knowledge (professional cultures, local knowledge, hierarchy seen from two sides) caused a trivialization of the reforms. The strictly instrumental regime of the NPM was bypassed by micro-political strategies within organizations, and it ran partially aground on professional cultures. The promises of a de-bureaucratization were only partially realized, and the effects in regard to control are questionable and thin. The bureaucratic rules were replaced with new forms of control and regulation, and particularly at the lower levels of hierarchy lead to a decrease in workplace quality.

Now that we know some of the shortcomings of administrative reform in Switzerland, what can be done? Of course there is no simple answer to all the questions I addressed in this chapter. But as a general guideline I propose: first, public management should take the concept of "organizational and professional cultures" into account stronger than it has done up to now (see Henriksson, Wrede, & Burau, 2006). Only if the concepts of the members of the organizations are taken into account too, we can expect legitimation for the reform processes. Secondly, reformers should never underestimate local knowledge within organizations, even when this knowledge does not get expressed in a managerial language (see Drechsler, 2004). This makes it difficult to design good indicators, for instance, because they have to be developed through a long negotiation process. Thirdly, public management should leave the rhetoric of de-bureaucratization aside because every form of management must rely on regulation and hierarchy (see James, 2005). It would be rather helpful to put more emphasis on serving the citizen in an efficient way than to denigrate public administration. Fourth, "Big bang" promises of reform (McNulty & Ferlie, 2004) should be replaced by more serious bottom-up working in the field. Maybe this way the new Public Management can become what the old NPM never achieved, but demanded from the others: efficient, effective, and citizen-oriented management.

NOTES

1. In this paper, I skip the political discussions around NPM, which was of course important too, and restrict my argument to the organizational level. I allow myself just one remark in this footnote: NPM has sometimes been attacked as being a "neoliberal" approach. This argument holds true, if it aims at the remodeling of political structures, which did not happen in Switzerland. But as long as NPM is applied to the state bureaucracy only on an organizational level, it has been regarded as a more technical than a political approach. So it does not come by surprise that some of the most fervent promoters to introduce NPM on the organizational level were social democrats.

2. "Cultural models are presupposed, taken-for-granted models of the world that are widely shared (although not necessarily to the exclusion of other, alternative models) by the members of a society and that play an enormous role in their understanding of that world and their behavior in it" (Holland & Quinn, 1987, p. 4). This definition can be easily transferred to professions and organizations if we replace the term "society" and scale down on the range a little.

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PART I: DEFINING CULTURE