

AUTHORITARIANISM IN STATE BUREAUCRACIES: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF BUREAUCRATIC CONFORMITY

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INTRODUCTION

Nurses in hospitals, scientists in industry, lecturers, tutors and technicians in universities, secretarial staff in the world of commerce, administrators, telephonists, social workers, social planners, teachers and others employed by government departments frequently have grievances about the conditions of their employment. They feel dissatisfied because they feel unduly controlled. Yet they know that any improvement in their working conditions, even their very jobs, will be at risk if they openly express their resentment.

The employees listed above spend a large part of their lives in bureaucracies which have been defined as hierarchies "designed to coordinate the work of many individuals in the pursuit of large scale administrative tasks".¹ Such "coordination" can become a form of control aimed not only at achieving the official objectives of the organisation but also at perpetuating the power and status of key people.

Such controls are made possible by and contribute to the acquiescence of most employees, but why should acquiescence be so widespread? The means of control do not reach the dramatic, nightmarish means of an Orwellian Big Brother, and the consequences of such machinery may not always be similar to the fearful 1984 obedience of the mass of the people.² Yet, in the interpretation of bureaucracies' official regulations there exists an enormous potential for the abuse of authority. For example, the codes of conduct issued by public service boards in Australian states may not always appear military in their content and objectives, yet they retain a preoccupation with the means of control: justifying hierarchies, reinforcing the respect due to senior officials, outlining the consequences of disobedience.³

AUTHORITARIANISM DEFINED

Some uses of authority which I have examined by interviewing public service employees and by reading their records were described by those employees as "authoritarian". This is a notion which has already received exhaustive analysis in an examination of the traits which contribute to social discrimination in general and to the particular prejudice of anti-semitism.⁴ My concern is not so much with individual traits but rather with those abuses of authority which have included practices such as a secret keeping of records, punishment of dissidents and the concealing of information.

These practices represent authoritarianism. Although such a definition facilitates the task of identifying authoritarian behaviour, other methodological safeguards have to be taken. For example, one should avoid the trap of merely recording as authoritarian that conduct which an interviewer or respondents did not like, or where this adjective was used uncritically in other ways. Authoritarian behaviour should not be equated with the exercise of authority; it represents an abuse of authority and is not necessarily a consequence of, nor synonymous with, bureaucratisation.

However, employees in large bureaucracies do object strongly to the *style* in which authority is exercised, as when a senior bureaucrat consistently fails to consult or when a politician goes out of his way to victimise his critics. Others might argue that such examples represent bullying, excessive forms of control or just irresponsibility. The question remains whether bullying, some kinds of irresponsibility and excessive control represent forms of suppression to be labelled authoritarian. This chapter analyses the conditions which contribute to such suppression.

THE MAIN ISSUES

In the following discussion, examples will be taken from the experiences of employees in several large organisations, including government departments in New South Wales. More important than the specific examples will be the identification of the conditions which would contribute to the abusive use of authority in any large organisation, including scientific establishments and institutions of tertiary education which are the subject of analysis in other chapters in this book.

A major question for analysis concerns the interrelationship of personality and organisational structure. In the examples which follow, are we seeing authoritarian individuals who happen to work in a particular organisation, or are we seeing unpleasant but obligatory administrative tasks which merely happen to have been made the responsibility of certain staff? To begin to answer these questions it is necessary to unmask an ideology of bureaucracy, that powerful set of ideas which enables large numbers of employees to explain, to make sense of, and seldom to question, their life at work.

AN IDEOLOGY OF BUREAUCRACY

Assumptions about correct behaviour in organisations are held by employees at different levels of a hierarchy and amount to an ideology of bureaucracy which sustains such employees' belief in their work, and their employing organisation. References to strong leadership and efficient administration are central notions in this ideology.

Strong leadership is illustrated by popular images of politicians and executives as being single-minded, willing to take unpopular decisions, and who allegedly do not vacillate under pressure. Efficient administration has been revered in a decade which has seen a preoccupation with cutting costs and which has sponsored the careers of management consultants who are paid to prescribe remedies for inefficiency. Yet, efficiency has hardly ever been operationalised in bureaucracies in terms of assessing and increasing staff motivation, morale and output. It remains a general praise word used to describe and justify what is actually done.

It hardly matters that these terms are problematical, unlikely to survive close examination. They are of particular use in dressing up the organisation in acceptable terms, in concealing the real goals of the organisation, such as survival, the maintenance of internal power structures, and expansion.

The notion of "strength" through strong leadership is instrumental in this ideology in underlining the force of personality, or at least certain kinds or personality. The notion of "efficiency" is often used to describe an allegedly ideal system of organisation. The fact that these nouns could be used to refer to either individual behaviour or organisational system, or both, brings us back to the problem of analysis, the intersection of psychological and social forces in their historical context.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: STRENGTH THROUGH EFFICIENCY

Any current concerns to convey an impression of strength through efficiency have a long political momentum behind them. For example, the autobiographical accounts of those who joined the National Socialists and helped Hitler to power are filled with references to the importance of discipline as a means of achieving a "new social order".⁵

In Britain, during the general election of 1983, young voters interviewed by BBC reporters said that they regarded Prime Minister Thatcher as strong because she would "stand up and not back down to the unions". Thatcher's alleged triumph in winning the Falklands War, and the televised response, in 1983, of some Americans to President Reagan's invasion of Grenada, that "at last there's a real 'man' in the White House", serve to reconvince politicians and a majority of their electorates of the importance nationally of being unashamed in the use of power.

In the state of New South Wales, the importance of getting the media to convey images of strong government and a strong leader do not appear to have been dented even by inquiries into alleged government corruption. Authoritarian controls, such as secrecy and the dismissal of employees who tried to release information about malpractice, have so far been effective in preventing the exposure of corruption.^{6, 7} Electoral techniques are used to present a macho image of the state's leader as in the caption "Wran's the Man", a claim substantiated by the argument that a powerful but usually invisible Secretary to the Premier's Department was the clever manager, the man behind the man.⁸ Such images of strength through efficiency have provided cues for the administrators of government bureaucracies, those senior civil servants who are accountable ultimately to the men at the top.

The authoritarian practices which are the subject of analysis here are not occurring under fascist or other totalitarian political regimes. They have occurred in countries which pride themselves in their democracy and openness in government and which appear at first sight to oppose the strong centralising forces at work in contemporary capitalism, whether specifically in institutions of higher education⁹, or more generally, in all public service departments.¹⁰ In New South Wales a series of reports on proposals for reform in the public service have included an emphasis on a flexible management structure in which middle and junior personnel could develop their skills and would not be stifled by an excessively hierarchical organisation. Such reports also emphasised the value of sharing information among employees and with the public.¹¹

The desire of some governments to appear strong by taking unpopular decisions has been evident in the 1980s in severe cutbacks in the funds for tertiary education. Such cutbacks were accompanied by concerted efforts, in Britain indirectly by the University Grants Commission, and in the province of British Columbia in Canada directly by the Social Credit government to tighten central control over universities.¹² These developments underlined the importance of the warning made a decade earlier that at least in one kind of public bureaucracy the staff should determine the structure of the institution that they worked in. Professor John Griffith wrote that, following the values of independence and self-direction applicable to social activities generally, the nature of working in universities should be "essentially anti-authoritarian, anti-oligarchic and anti-hierarchical".¹³

SYSTEMS OF CONTROL

In the New South Wales government reports referred to earlier, the author expressed the hope that bureaucratic practices of centralised control, failure to share information and promotion through seniority would become relics of a bygone age. Yet these "relics" have remained as inherent features of bureaucratic organisation and facilitate some individuals' concern to control other staff members' behaviour.

Sometimes the form of control is open, sometimes it is secret. Always it has included some forms of aggressive behaviour by men and women and a quick or eventual

submissiveness by staff who were the subject of that aggression, or who carried out instructions. As in Milgram's famous experiments on obedience to authority, the cooperation of willing or even reluctant subordinates perpetuates tyrannical conduct as much as the destructive attitudes and initiatives of superiors.¹⁴ Such a process is perhaps not too surprising. For example, in his analysis of the theories of Weber and Chester Barnard, Hopkins wrote "the giving of orders or the sending of communications are themselves forms of compliance because the orders a participant gives are assumed to derive directly from those he receives".¹⁵

The examples which follow come from interviews and correspondence with employees who had complained of various excessive uses of authority over them and their colleagues. The first set of examples refer to various official controls which were perceived by the recipients as overly aggressive but which were successful in ensuring the submission of these "recipients". The second set of examples illustrates intolerance of questions and debate.

(a) Aggression and submission

In a series of personal interviews, several social workers employed in a state welfare organisation described how their professional training had led them to expect that the work of their agency would be characterised by idealism. They were disappointed and all felt a sense of disquiet and discomfort. One of them observed, "the lives of hundreds and hundreds of people have been made miserable by working here". His observation was confirmed by groups of colleagues in different offices who spoke of their own low morale and who concluded that the way to survive was either to leave or to stay and be obedient.^{16, 17}

The difference between a reasonable attempt to be efficient and unreasonable use of authority is a matter of interpretation, but employees usually resent secret attempts to check on and so influence their work. For example, in the State Electricity Commission, allegations have been made of excessive secrecy and rule by fear, as manifest in the filling out of pre-printed forms by supervisors on all the staff below them — forms which asked questions about an "employee's ability, initiative, time-keeping and so on".¹⁸

Under systems of secrecy, staff and public are maintained in states of relative ignorance and authoritarianism knows few limits. For example, the low state of morale among employees of the Department of Youth and Community Services was attributed to "an humiliating tradition of secrecy which has produced a well grounded fear that even small grievances cannot be discussed openly".¹⁹ In the same organisation, some forms of control resented by staff included decisions to transfer some officers to different offices without consulting them.^{20, 21} The employees in question were dismayed by such practices but felt powerless to challenge their superiors.

In a Public Service Board investigation of the Department of Agriculture, an Acting Assistant Director made notes, "quoted from memory, as close to verbatim as possible", of the alleged critical attitude of an officer and of his "intransigence". The Acting Assistant Director reported these comments to the management division of the Board and a senior member of the Board made a written note "The general conduct of the officer of the Department will be taken up at the completion of the appraisal, unless circumstances force the issue earlier". "Taken up" meant a further investigation to see whether "disciplinary charges" could be made against the intransigent staff member.

Language such as "charge", "disciplinary action", usually reflects military means of controlling subordinates or adversary systems governing the administration of justice. Accusations or imputations of guilt associated with the notion "charge" may be appropriate means of sustaining due processes of criminal law yet they have also been retained without question in public service bureaucracies. An alternative view, namely that conflicts in employee relationships could be dealt with by practices of careful consultation and negotiation, as between peers, finds no place. Notions of openness, debate, mutual problem solving and support for colleagues could replace that disciplinary language which has already

had a long life, but such notions would challenge structures that are taken for granted, would challenge the convenient ideology of bureaucracy which gives employees a sense of order and security.

However, aggressive, hostile investigations and submissiveness as a response to such forms of control are usually neither sensational nor obvious. The suppression which lowers morale and demands redress is not so much the abrupt moments of humiliation as month after month of disregarding employees. Such disregard may be shown in valuing only the staff who give no trouble, or by providing no support for those who may be working under difficult conditions, as in community welfare offices where staff are expected to meet increased public demand with fewer resources.

Disregard establishes domination almost as effectively as more obvious forms of coercion. By making disparaging observations about other workers, or by seldom expressing interest in or feelings about their colleagues' work, people in power are able to grind down the sense of self-worth of lower status employees. "This, rather than open abuse, is how he [the employer] bends them to his will. When shame is silent, implicit, it becomes a patent tool of bringing people to heel."²²

(b) *Intolerance of debate*

It is difficult to initiate open debate about the consequences of not consulting staff on matters which directly affect them because such non-consultation is often sustained on the grounds that correct administrative behaviour requires little obligation to take notice of subordinates. In the same tradition, outsiders' requests for information can be treated with indifference, criticism is ostensibly "not heard" and an image of business as usual is maintained.

The habit of not answering correspondence is a well-developed means of blunting opposition, of trying to make critics give up. In response to such refusal to reply, the writer can always use the option of going public, by distributing papers, by writing "letters to the editor". Such actions prompted a senior public servant to complain to this author: "You have no right to do this, why are you being so discourteous? If you want us to cooperate with you professionally, you cannot engage in such practices. If you have useful ideas, why don't you write a private letter to myself or the Minister?"

In his attempt to head off opposition, the civil servant makes a strong appeal to certain moral principles — to "being courteous", to "having no right", to "being professional". His appeal for obedience derives from an attitude which is often evoked in response to a variety of authority figures: parents, leaders, supernatural powers and so forth. All such appeals, says Adorno, have to do with the moral aspects of life, with standards, with offenders against them who deserve to be punished.²³ Some elaboration of this psychology of conformity will be pursued later in this analysis in a discussion of the functions, in organisational terms, of individuals' anti-intellectualism and their defence of certain moral principles. At this point it is more pertinent to describe further those circumstances which contribute to authoritarian behaviour.

In the field of welfare, the survival of voluntary agencies depends largely on state financial patronage which can vary according to assessments of the proper behaviour — duly respectful, morally worthy, and therefore deserving — of the representatives of voluntary organisations. Such agencies want to be successful in their annual submissions. The pun is deliberate. Not only must the financial request be presented in the appropriate manner, but respect for the father and mother figures must be considered genuine and consistent. For example, in a newsletter article, the representative of a NSW Voluntary Child Care Agency had criticised state government arrangements for funding substitute care. In response to this article, the Minister concerned was said to have blocked the agency's funds and said to the writer of the critical article: "If I had my way I'd throw your typewriter in the river". The leader of the voluntary agency explained, "Only when I pleaded on bended knee to have the funding renewed was I successful".

The practice of cutting off funds, or threatening to cut off funds as a means of reprisal persists in the context of dependency relationships, as between a Public Service Board's attempts to monitor and control the budgets of other departments of government and in the relationship between the State Welfare Department and the voluntary sector. In respect of this latter relationship, a leading member of a voluntary organisation was told that if she continued to even meet with a particular group which analysed state welfare policies, her agency would lose its funds. That person has explained that her management committee felt intimidated by the government civil servant's attitude and asked her to "back off putting pressure on the government, otherwise we will always have funding problems".

These examples, of appealing for courtesy, of refusal to answer correspondence, and of repeated threats to cut off financial help, derive from some individuals' apparent fascination with exercising power through handling money and their unwillingness to tolerate criticism.

Although there is an emphasis here on the behaviour of key individuals and although a certain structure has facilitated the promotion of such people to positions of prominence, it is at least plausible to argue that the economic climate also influences the defensive, often frightened, way in which they assert themselves. At a time of recession when jobs are scarce, the holders of such positions may be even more concerned than usual not to allow challenge to themselves or the organisation which sustains their self-image and self-interests.

Nevertheless, it is their intolerance of ideas, of imaginative policies, let alone debate, which remains the conservative motif of those who run organisations. They follow the notion of rational authority based on the belief and legality of rules and the right of those who occupy posts by virtue of these rules to issue commands. They have seen disruptions as removing the quality of omnipotence from themselves and from other figures of authority in the chain of command. The highest valued traits — loyalty and obedience — in these organisations are parts of that ideology of managerial fraternalism reminiscent of the "boss is father metaphor" which characterised the company town philosophies of the nineteenth century.²⁴ In reality, then, as now, the bosses were anything but supportive, protective, loving leaders of their employees.

In another context, the reluctant acceptance by working-class men of an annoying sense of personal inferiority has been described by Sennett and Cobb as the "hidden injuries of class".²⁵ To paraphrase these authors' conclusions, the hidden injuries of welfare employees are that they must think of themselves as unimportant, except inasmuch as they are industrious, compliant, unquestioning cogs in a machine. They are to be the "locals", whose preoccupation should be with the rules and routines of their employing agency as opposed to the "cosmopolitans" who place their loyalty to abstract ideals, to their profession, and to other social networks, above that of their employing agency.²⁶ The survival and promotion of those whose orientation is local produces an atmosphere in which in Merton's terms, rules, originally conceived as a means become transferred into an end in itself, "an instrumental value becomes a terminal value".²⁷ At this point it is pertinent to return to the question about the relationship between individual traits and organisational structure by unravelling those major ideological themes of strength and efficiency.

STRENGTH AND EFFICIENCY

The enduring psychological disposition of those politicians and civil servants whose behaviour I have just described is to keep good order, to be correct, to ensure that other people do not stray outside their roles. This concern with orderly conduct is part of that set of assumptions which breathes new life into an always potentially authoritarian ideology. As argued earlier, and as shown in other periods of history when severe economic difficulties have facilitated politicians' arguments about the need to impose discipline and defend old values, these assumptions have poignancy at a time of recession when ministerial concern is with knowing where the dollar is, with giving the public value for money, and with eliminating signs of inefficiency. Such ideas have produced this decade's pejorative political

epithets, as in the distinctions between the wets and the dries — the wets, in Thatcher's terms, being those who are weak, who have not had the strength to stand up to adverse economic and political conditions, and the dries being those who are supposed to be strong because they are willing to face unpopularity by refusing to intervene to defend supposedly weak individuals.

In my observations of the grievances of employees such as social workers, secretaries, teachers and social planners, it appeared that two techniques, a defence of certain moral values and anti-intellectualism, were used by senior staff to express sentiments both about themselves and their particular ideology of bureaucracy.

(a) *Defending moral principles*

In their concern to bind the lines and bonds of authority, the proponents of images of strength also covered their own and their organisation's weaknesses, a technique which could be perceived in defensive behaviour in which a major concern was with moral scruples. Demonstrating strength could also be identified in forms of attack in which the work of imagination in politics, and in the day to day management of bureaucracies was to be distrusted.

Defence of current practices can be just as aggressive and humiliating as open forms of attack. For example, the senior civil servant who suspects sexual goings on among his junior staff and who reprimands them on the basis of his suspicions, is defending some notion of correct conduct. At this point one can only speculate on the religious or other beliefs of such senior staff and their assumptions about the correct behaviour of adult men and women. The point is that these beliefs have become part of an organisational agenda, they are examples of the fusion of the personal and the political, the process whereby personal habit becomes embedded in the objectives and machinery of an organisation.

Control, as a defensive response to any pressure to effect change, appears to be the mechanism used by career-oriented, loyal bureaucrats who cope with their jobs by adherence to rules. In defending the organisation, they defend themselves. In asserting their reverence for seniority, or for obedience to department heads, they try to conceal their own sense of threat, or their organisation's difficulties. An aura of infallibility must be maintained. Accountability is to the organisation, not to the client, to the powerful, not to the powerless.

As in a corral surrounded by hostile forces, threatened people can defend themselves by calling in outside helpers. In an age of monetarist beliefs, when cost-effectiveness becomes the objective, the outside helpers are often management consultants, but they are seldom asked to consider whether the corral is worth defending, whether departmental policies have much bearing on public needs. Instead, their tasks are to simplify management procedures, to examine structures, to produce diagrams about flows of communication and lines of responsibility. The net result is to mystify further the importance of hierarchies and so contribute to the belief that such forms of dominance and subordination are the only way to organise work if it is to get done.

The appointment of management consultants "to examine the management of the New South Wales Department of Youth and Community Services" was regarded on the one hand as a demonstration that the organisation was doing something²⁸ and on the other as another example of staff interests being ignored.²⁹ The need to be seen to be doing things has been documented as characterising manipulative type behaviour in which certain individuals divided the world into empty, schematic, administrative fields and treated everything and everyone as an object to be handled, but with indifference to the content of what was going to be done.³⁰ Doing something is politically more attractive than appearing to do nothing or even, says van Krieken, questioning some of those basic assumptions of the organisation by increasing staff participation in producing their own solutions.³¹

The tendency to call in outside management consultants illustrates a habit of thought

which is superficially attractive because it seems to provide a short cut to understanding and can anaesthetise politicians, civil servants and others into thinking that there are simple remedies for complex problems. An image of being objective, above politics, above human foibles, appeals to those whose concern is with the correctness of things and who see management of people as non-ideological. Such a perspective is held not only by staff at the top of a hierarchy. The compliance of junior staff because they think it is in their best interests also facilitates the smooth running of organisations. Tutors and technicians in universities, nurses in hospitals, public servants in government departments can and do muzzle their sense of grievance. At least they do so in sufficient numbers to convey to their seniors that they need change neither their attitudes nor the structure of the organisation. In consequence the concern with administrative tidiness remains as part of that ideology, which says, implicitly or explicitly, that human interests should be subordinated to economic ones. It is a way of thinking which makes a spurious separation between economic and social affairs, between the concern of the accountant and the objectives of maximising the welfare of employees as well as of clients.

Management consultants have become the witch doctors in a decade of pragmatism when efficiency is the hallmark of strength, when a sense of vision generated through fascination with ideas finds no place in those political lobbies concerned with a kind of bureaucratic selfishness, protecting the organisation and those in power. This is an exact reversal of Titmuss' old adage that social policy is about the triumph of altruism over egoism.³² Indeed, such a statement might now be regarded as wet, as weak, as something to be scoffed at by "strong people".

(b) *Anti-intellectualism*

Defence is usually concerned with protecting order. For example, protests against new ideas have appeared in the form of a defence by powerful conservative groups, such as public service unions in New South Wales, of existing conditions and their own interests.³³ By contrast, those who are regarded as symbolising disorder because they present new ideas are frequently attacked as "intellectuals", or as people who associate with intellectuals.

Writing about the paternalism of company towns in nineteenth and early twentieth century America, Jane Addams, the social worker, described the anti-intellectualism of company leaders who felt that they were being paternal and loving in their attitudes to their employees. They thought they were loving fathers of their children, and they expected to be perceived as such. They appealed for loyalty and felt betrayed by questions, let alone rebellion.³⁴

Politicians and senior civil servants may be unable or unwilling to confront the inherent contradictions in their wish to demonstrate care *and* control. Other contradictions in state bureaucracies include the need for these organisations to employ both conforming bureaucrats and autonomous professions. In this respect, contradictions also exist between the values placed on developing policies and ideas at all levels of the bureaucracy *and* insisting on protocol and attention to detail as part of competent staff performance. Instead of debating these contradictions and welcoming the development of ideas as a criterion for taking seriously the proposals for reform in government administration, letters go unanswered, questions in the state Parliament are answered in monosyllables (usually "no"), and alternatives to existing administrative practices are described as arrant nonsense, or are answered by the well-developed habit of merely abusing the Opposition.³⁵ It is almost as though one of the hallmarks of a "democracy" that wants to sustain an image of strength is not to tolerate any challenge which might dent this image. Protecting that image leaves little room for toleration of ideas or the people who raise them.

If powerful administrators take for granted the value of the set of assumptions about maintaining good order, then any sense of unhappiness and tension in their departments can easily be attributed to the activities of those insiders who are seen as disloyal or disobedient,

or outsiders who are "trouble-makers". That discipline which can be applied within organisations and which Merton has shown produces over-conformity and "induces timidity, conservatism and technicism"³⁶, may also be directed at an organisation's outside critics. For example, in the controversies in the agencies referred to above, outside critics were lumped together as "trouble-makers" or "intellectuals" or they earned that other monolithic label, "just Marxists". As an alternative, "anarchist" is apparently an even more disparaging and dismissive label since it can be applied to almost anyone who asks critical questions, who does not cooperate. As an extra dimension to the ideology of bureaucracy, staff who are known to associate with the "anarchists" are assumed to have been contaminated by them and should not be trusted.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Are we any nearer to answering the question whether authoritarianism derives from the habits and values of individuals, or whether it is the product of some organisational tradition whose force is difficult to deflect?

The distinction in this question represents a false dichotomy. It is impossible to separate the individuals who behave so insensitively to their colleagues from the immediate contexts in which they operate. The interrelationship of potentially authoritarian individuals and that set of assumptions that good order and efficient administration are fulfilled through control, produces a self-fulfilling prophecy. If competence within the organisation is measured in terms of key staff being "solid, conservative and non-controversial"³⁷, promotion by other sets of criteria will take a long time to produce a different set of assumptions, a different atmosphere, different leaders and a reduction in existing forms of central control. Until that time is reached, those controlling individuals who like to appear strong will continue to be able to shape their own needs according to those bureaucratic conditions which they have helped to create.

Authoritarianism in organisations has been manifest in repeated forms of intolerance, as in an intense dislike, almost a fear, of questions and debate. It has been evident in aggressive assertion of power by superiors over their subordinates and in the submission to authority by people at different levels in hierarchies because they have wished to preserve their own influence or that of the system which had given them their status. This submission to authority is the binding principle, of both those who assert their power over fellow employees and of those who feel constrained by the system but who were socialised long ago into believing that obedience, loyalty and compliance were virtues which the organisation valued and which would usually result in rewards. By contrast, those who did not comply would be dealt with by at best having no reward, at worst by being punished.

Incidents of authoritarianism are evidence of a long, unfinished agenda for producing greater participation among employees and the development of experiments in a democratic tradition. A bureaucracy in which deference and obedience are not equated with competence would mean less rather than greater need to conform to superiors. The process whereby the allegedly efficient manager takes over in government as well as in business results in a decline in political debate and conflict. This negation, as in reluctance to openly share information and ideas about different forms of management, different ways to exercise authority, requires challenge. "Democracy requires institutions which support conflict and disagreement as well as those which sustain legitimacy and consensus."³⁸

In concentrating on authoritarian practices between staff and the political conditions that facilitate such behaviour, no claim has been made about the possible connection between employees' negative reactions to their own treatment and their responses to relatively powerless clients. However, the literature on organisational theory is replete with examples of the relationships between internal and external relations in a bureaucracy. The regulation of the poor is an almost inevitable corollary of the internalised discipline of the bureaucrats.³⁹

The powerlessness of patients is partly the product of the preoccupation of the medical profession with maintaining and enlarging medical dominance.⁴⁰

At the tail end of a chapter it is inappropriate to embark on this new subject: the effect on the “beneficiaries” of organisations — clients, students, patients — of abuses of authority as exercised over employees. It is germane to ask questions about the effects of suppression on people’s lives at work. On the one hand it is apparent that some employees are happy to conform. Others are miserable because they had perceived their jobs as potentially stimulating and productive: stimulating if they and their ideas could be taken seriously, productive if they could be encouraged to develop their potential and not feel constrained by excessive controls.

That psychology of conformity that has been derived from an ideology of bureaucracy has been evident in particular in welfare organisations. Although the processes described here almost certainly apply to all large bureaucracies, some sceptics may feel that there is a risk in drawing conclusions on the basis of a few controversial events. The alternative to taking the risk is to raise no questions, to place no obstacles in the way of practices which affront people’s sense of fairness, which stifle talent and which are not in the spirit of democracy.

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