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Book Review: Good Old Fashioned Management

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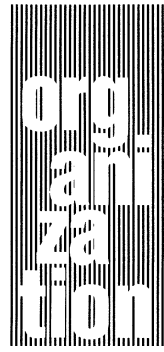
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Book Review



Good Old Fashioned Management

Managing Britannia: Culture and Management in Modern Britain, R. Protherough and J. Pick. Edgeways: Brynmill Press, 2002. 212pp., £18, ISBN 0907839681

This book is a caustic and well timed attack on the culture of managerialism in Blair's Britain. That last sentence was a perfectly correct and defensible puff that Brynmill Press do not have my permission to use on future reprints of this odd little book. Protherough and Pick seem to detest much about the age that we live in, and they believe that 'management' is the main reason that we have all been going to hell in a handbasket so rapidly. Many readers of this journal will agree with them, and I agree with them too. Sort of.

Devotees of Critical Management Studies (CMS) have worried a lot about what the word 'critical' means. In order that the boundary between 'us' and 'them' is clear, it is necessary to distinguish between the sort of critique that is morally righteous and that which is self-interested posturing. The problem is that there are lots of people who claim to be critical of the current climate of managerialism—business ethicists, opportunistic management gurus, relativizing postmodernists, consumer champions, doctrinaire Marxists, careful reformers and the sort of anarchists who throw bricks through the windows of McDonald's. But these people do not agree on the distribution of the righteous and the self-interested. Indeed, they actually agree about very little. Even calling this a rainbow coalition is stretching the elastic qualities of rainbows a little too far.

Protherough and Pick remind us that there is yet another position in this rainbow, the sort of conservatism that rails against 'bureaumania' in the name of unfettered personal freedoms. Here, management is bad because it is an extension of the petty mentality of the *petit bourgeois* once they move into positions of responsibility and power. The state (now sadly detached from the moral qualities of 'nation' in our multicultural times) has mutated into a sprawling apparatus based around the idea that everything must be controlled. And, whether represented by Thatcher or Blair (or even that older



demon, Karl Marx), nothing can be left alone. Government becomes a gigantic nosy neighbour, and no Englishman can now claim that his home is still his castle. There is a deep nostalgia here too of course. Protherough and Pick seem to believe that the past really was better—when the local baker made wholesome bread and good administrators displayed wholesome traits of personal character. And then the world started to change for the worse. This, I think, is a form of anti-managerialism that has some ancient ancestors and some highly conservative implications.

Bureaucratie, rule from the desk, was coined (according to Baron de Grimm in a letter dated 1 July 1764) by Vincent de Gournay in the middle of the 18th century. De Gournay was one of the progressive French ‘physiocrats’ or ‘economists’ who stressed a dynamic and liberal view of the circulation of wealth against centralized state protectionism. He saw bureaumania as an ‘illness’, an impediment to the proper exercise of commercial freedoms. But marketizing radicalism was not the only site from which this complaint was launched. In 1830s England, the term was often used in resistance to the centralization of poor relief and public health measures. Thomas Carlyle, in 1850, referred to it as ‘the continental nuisance’ and many cultural conservatives, from Matthew Arnold to T. S. Eliot, seem to have equated cultural decline with bureaucratization and commerce. More lately, George Ritzer has replayed this attitude with a Weberian spin in his McDonaldization thesis. It seems to me that Protherough and Pick’s attempt to rescue culture from the ‘robotic grasp of the bureaucrats’ (p. 205) exemplifies this long-standing theme. This is the nostalgic liberalism of ‘intellectuals’ who fear that the masses are dissolving real values in the corrosive bath of commerce.

To be clear here, Protherough and Pick are not libertarians in the sense that they wish to argue against any and all forms of intervention. They seem happy enough for the state to exist, and for organizations to do whatever it is that they do. What seems to annoy them most is that *certain* forms of culture and language are being degraded by the shrill demand for accountability. They spend almost no time worrying about the toiling classes in the pottery factory or call centre, but vent a great deal of spleen against those who have tried to claim that universities, art galleries, theatres, churches and culture itself should be subjected to the same kind of intrusive controls. This is an aesthetic judgement of the ‘how dare they!’ variety. It is the crassness and vulgarity of these jumped-up traffic wardens that seems to annoy them most, and the ‘deadening’ effects of managerial language that provide their most common illustrations.

That said, there was a huge amount in this book that set my head nodding. The criticisms of performance targets that merely encourage behaviour that meets performance targets. The questioning of the separation of a generalized domain of managerial expertise with ‘universally applicable axioms’ (p. 33) from that at which it is aimed. The stories about ‘rebranding Britain’ and the monstrous Dome, and some nice ideas about literature’s generalized hostility to business. Better still, management gurus are lambasted for their pseudo-expertise and patronizing populism: ‘The reader is assumed to have a limited attention span, but to be in urgent need of conversion to the managerial cause, and so is addressed like a backward child in a missionary school’ (p. 62). There is even approving reference to several of the CMS academics who sometimes occupy the pages of this journal, though this is combined



Organization 11(6)

Review

with an attack on postmodern management academics for 'prose that is bafflingly obscure, and yet apparently full of self-importance' (p. 59). Surely not!

Yet, despite agreeing with much of this, Protherough and Pick's book deeply troubles me for the questions it raises about the nature of a unified opposition to market managerialism. There is a kind of anti-modern critique, one engaged in the lengthy class-inflected debate between conservatives and reforming utilitarians. Though they are never explicit about what they *do* want to sponsor (being happier bashing everyone else), they seem to have faith in the intrinsic qualities of a particular form of life, a romanticized version of occupation as vocation. They complain that 'the British worker is no longer a craftsman or professional, but has been forced into acting as a state controlled automaton' (p. 42). Decades of working-class struggle against capitalist deskilling in the workplace, and the self-interested market strategies of highly paid elites, are reduced to a lost idyll of happy industrial feudalism. What Protherough and Pick want is 'proper, old fashioned management' (p. 205) which pits 'common sense' against the halogen brightness of nasty 'modern' management (p. 193).

However, common sense is never shared, otherwise it would not need to be claimed and defended so enthusiastically. What this book encourages the careful reader to do is consider what alternatives to managerialism are actually being advanced. If the word 'critical' merely means head-nodding about things 'we' don't like, then it is easy enough to get Charles Handy and Hugh Willmott to complain in unison. However, if it also means putting forward ideas about what alternative forms of organizing might look like, matters become rather more complex. It is only then, I believe, that questions about power, democracy and justice become meaningful, and these are entirely evaded in Protherough and Pick's elaborate defence of high culture and its institutions. This book is a potential addition to the armoury of texts that might be used by CMS, but my enemies' enemies are not necessarily my friends.

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