Political Hybrids: Tocquevillean Views on Project Organizations*

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ABSTRACT   For the past decade, project organization has become increasingly central to management and organization studies, particularly as these seek to discern the contours of post-modern organizations. Yet, these contours frequently seem to be sighted without bearings on the current realities of project management. In this paper we take such bearings, using data derived from detailed qualitative, ethnographic enquiry into the experience of project management. From this data we construct the contours of project management more sharply. Rather than being a harbinger of an autonomous and more democratic future, free from extant bureaucratic organization controls, we find that project management has distinct modalities of control that we outline in the paper: reputational, calculative, and professional. Indeed, rather than foreshadowing a future transformational form, we find traces of a much older design: that of de Tocqueville.

INTRODUCTION: PROJECT MANAGEMENT AS PREFIGURATIVE?

To be a project manager is to assume a responsibility for the management and accomplishment – the completion – of various projects characterized by finitude, a specific scope, and, often, contractual particulars. Usually, but not always, these are commercial projects – they are projects where, above all else, one is expected to make a difference – creating something such as a bridge, a building, a tunnel, a discovery, often a profit. There are myriads of such projects and every project tells many stories. Sometimes these are stories of desires attained, regrets that must be lived with, dreams accomplished, or nightmares produced: innumerable and remarkable stories of glory, accomplishment, deceit and punishment, stories that we have been collecting for some years, slowly building up a sense of the thematic

relevancies that ring true in mundane stories of ordinary people who happen to be Project Managers. In this paper we shall introduce two of these people, and their stories, as emblematic of the tensions involved in being a project manager today, as we have come to see them.

Recent management theorists have increasingly seen project management in quite specific terms: as a circuit breaker for bureaucracy, a short cut from the modern to the postmodern, from bureaucracy and hierarchy to post-bureaucratic professionalism and collaboration (Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994). Early commentators on 'new-form organizations' or 'postmodern organizations', such as Hydebrand (1989) or Clegg (1990) had presumed a connection between the past of modernity and bureaucracy and the future of a project-based postmodern organizational world. At base, their conceptions of post-bureaucracy seemed to combine elements of an organic structure (Burns and Stalker, 1962) with changed modalities of control that had shifted to more indirect and internalized forms, as writers such as Hydebrand (1989, p. 345) and Sewell (1998, p. 408) suggest. Elements of empowerment and self-reliance formed the basis for an elective affinity between project management practice and ideas of post-bureaucracy centred on unobtrusive peer-based teamwork controls (Barker, 1999; Sewell, 1998; see also Black and Edwards, 2000; Fairtlough, 1994; Miles and Snow, 1986). Contemporary managerial discourse and practices for the past decade have been characterized mainly by the emergence of political and organizational models that, whatever else they might be, have been opposed to 'bureaucracy' as their 'other' (Alvesson, 1992; Clegg, 1990; Heckscher and Donnellon, 1994; Kanter 1990). The models define themselves through 'check lists' of criteria (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992) as well as through the ideological apparatus they convey (Du Gay, 2000).

Slightly lagged with the emergence of dualistic anti-bureaucratization has been another tendency, to go 'beyond dualisms' (Reed, 1997) into the analysis of 'hybrids' such as network forms (Bianchi and Bellini, 1991; Burt, 1992; Castells, 1996; Chaston, 1995, 1996; Contractor and Lorange, 1988; Ebers, 1997; Häusler et al., 1994; Kogut et al., 1992; Nohria and Eccles, 1992; Powell, 1987, 1998; Powell et al., 1996). Hybridity has become fashionable: for instance, Ackoff (1994) depicts new 'hybrid political regimes' composed of 'democratic hierarchy'.

It is easy to see why project management may appear to be a beacon for jaded organization theory with the promise of a new 'projectified' society of organizational projects (Lundin and Söderholm, 1998). Projects are usually not contained wholly within bureaucratic corporate hierarchies: they occur in field and laboratory settings, outside the formal structuring of organizations, often involving the coordination of complex networks and inter-organizational relations. Yet, despite its appeal to postmoderns, project management includes a strong hierarchical dimension, vertically defining objectives and responsibilities, which serve as an

instrumental legitimation of project action. Project management draws on a genealogy that traditionally embodies a 'well-established pattern of discourse that has served to privilege the more commercial and pragmatic aims of improved project coordination and control at the expense of traditional powers and autonomy' (Bresnen, 1996, p. 264). In turn, its core texts, such as Cleland and King (1968) and Lock (1968), build on ideas that derive from classical theories of management, such as Fayol (1949).

The professional work of project management draws heavily on the PMI (Project Management Institute), created in the United States at the end of the 1960s. Professionals, particularly in the management of major projects, gathered to formulate a management model linked to the logics of organization for each project. However, it was not until the start of the 1980s that a real panel of specialists was created: with an ethical code, clearly identified knowledge, and certification. The aim was to unify project management practices via a unique and standardizing paradigm. And this standardization led to the definition of criteria that allowed for the identification and classification of project types. Project management by this time was being practised in many diverse organizations: from small businesses that arranged local weddings, meetings, and conventions to major multinational corporations. According to the PMI, projects were to be listed according to the size of the team, the international dimension in the organization, the regulatory and professional tradition of the sector of activity, so that expertise could be standardized around the diversity of its application. Consequently, project management has been subject to the classical strategy of professionalization as social closure, in accord with Weber's (1978) model.

Project management has become organizationally enacted professional work: because of increased disciplinary training in project management methods by professional associations, its organizational division of labour is increasingly based on a small number of sophisticated methods that aid standardization. There is a move from past methods of organization, linked to criteria such as tradition and craft, to disciplinary skills, specializations and standards. Such a strategy for the creation of a 'project management' profession offers commercially independent accredited sources of legitimacy and power to its practitioners. The professional associations confer a legitimacy that is quite separate from that of the employing organization. To the extent that professionalism becomes organizationally legitimate for employers then the project profession appears to gain status. It offers an alternative source of career status to that of progression through the hierarchical ranks of bureaucratic management while clearly co-existing with these. Some influential reports on the future of work (http://www.dol.gov/asp/futurework/execsum.pdf) regard it as increasingly likely to be constructed on a project basis, as contingent and staffed by just in time workers. From this perspective, project management is prefigurative of the futures that, increasingly, we will be in. Thus, the model behoves critical scrutiny rather than easy acceptance.

CRITICALLY SCRUTINIZING PROJECT MANAGEMENT

Superiors nominate project leaders, just as they might a 'normal' hierarchical head. However, they have to work in close proximity, in a team, with those whom they are appointed to lead. Thus, their legitimacy as project leaders is never simply given by the fact of their appointment: each project manager has a reserve of legitimacy, once appointed, which the estimation of peers and fellow project members is crucial in maintaining. Ultimately, the fundamental reasons for nomination (specific skills, being an 'inventor/innovator' behind the idea, or just the sheer randomness of opportunity) are less important than the fact that the team members will consider the project leader as part of the central governing system of the organization. Thus, one part of their legitimacy is based on status-hierarchy. Project managers are not only leaders, however, but are also responsible for the success of a potentially important mission, given the resources put at their disposal. The project leader, assessed on a capacity to lead a team towards success, has a certain power over other team members. The success and commitment of one depends on the success of the other, and visa versa. In the project, nobody has the right to fail and this pressure to succeed shapes the legitimacy of the project leader, qualifying the status-hierarchy into a 'quasi-hierarchical' role where the personal – rather than the task – status is enhanced.

These two key resources, however (organizational nomination, leading to status-hierarchy, and pressure to succeed, leading to personal status) are also counterbalanced by certain sources of de-legitimation. The first can be found in the extreme power that use of the project management form affords classical corporate hierarchies to grant or refuse the resources required for the project. It creates a form of official dependence, since the project requires resources it is not capable of supplying itself. The second source lies in the fact that the project leader is still in most cases part of the hierarchy: the position of project leader can come up against stable and solid hierarchical structures able to dismiss those who manage to be recalcitrant. Project managers may be, as most of the managers we have interviewed were, scientists appointed to the project management position from a research position, or they may be line managers for whom the success of their project management will be the determinant of their future line position.

The tension between the personal and the hierarchical means that project authority becomes based more on interdependence than on hierarchical status. Consequently, the position of project leader has a tendency to veer towards personalization, where the ability to communicate, and personify, the pressure to succeed becomes vital. Yet, simultaneously with this personalization, a project leader's authority also has elements of the impersonal because it results from an organizational nomination. Yet, to the extent that the project takes place at some remove from the centres of power, out in the capillaries of its micro-systems, then its personal embodiment will tend to over-determine its legitimate positioning

within the overall formal networks of power. The degree of perceived proximity of the project with the centre of the organization, the more or less innovative or strategic character of the project and the degree of control it is under, even the person behind the idea that drives the project (often a senior person in the hierarchy, known as the project sponsor, who lends their legitimacy and positional power to the project) – all these will have an impact on the intensity and nature of the authority of the project leader. Balancing this, in situ, in the context of the project, team members know that, at least for a while, they may be dependent on the project leader for their personal evaluations. Typically, the locations at which projects occur are either physically or metaphorically remote from corporate bureaucracies, whether in field settings such as exploration or construction, innovative 'skunk-works', or R&D projects. Work that is done therein is not immediately visible to superiors distant from the project.

The remoteness of many projects poses particular organizational tensions for corporate hosts. The challenge is to reconcile the system of project authority with those structures of power embedded in the corporate body. The exercise of hierarchical power is far from being structurally linked to clear project systems of legitimized authority. Hierarchical power tends to depend on bureaucratic legitimacy embedded in routines and rules while project authority typically requires creativity and innovation in the accomplishment of objectives, rather than adherence to strict rules. Besides, as experienced project managers know, such strict rules are merely resources for creativity and innovation in their interpretation and negotiation (Clegg, 1975). Hence, external regulation meets project governmentality in a highly personalized bureaucracy.

Framed in between the desiderata of externally imposed regulation and intersubjectively shared governmentality, project management creates and imposes codes while at the same time it organizes and makes formal a number of negotiable exceptional possibilities (concerning deadlines, for example). It is based on a number of written supports, whose aim is formally to state the required actions, yet it must always leave room for innovation and creativity, disciplined by governmental norms. Thus, project management can be considered a hybrid between the centralised enactment of rules and procedures and a capacity to create the future. That this is the case can best be seen in the 'intimate histories' (Zeldin, 1995) of project management that we have been collecting for many years. From such short stories we build our theory.

BUILDING THEORY FROM SHORT STORIES:
MEETING HENRI AND MICHEL

As researchers, we have collected data on project careers; on who wins and loses, using what strategies and rationalities, in real contexts and situations. Such stories often start from small things close at hand to the individuals, focusing on detailed

descriptions and accounts of everyday experience. What we search for are accounts of practical, bounded, situational rationality. In the small pearls of every-day experience we see dialogical themes for social science to engage with. Thus, it matters not that the sample of stories that we retell and retail are small – the human comedy is an infinity of stories – but how their themes illuminate signifi-cant tensions, themes, and paradoxes of this condition of human agency within structural conditions, themes and paradoxes that we have become sensitized to over many years of exposure to such stories, on two continents.

To interpret stories of project management *politically* requires one to interpret the experience of those behind it, the teams and their activities. In other words, over and above interpreting individual biographies as personal work-stories, one should attempt to understand these in a context in which personal troubles assume a more public dimension. (Brusoni et al. (2001) make a similar point in their dis-cussion of the relation between power and knowledge in innovative project teams concerned with aircraft engine control systems.) Long, often intriguing, interviews have peppered our research into the political aspect of projects. In our interviews we have investigated the reasons why a manager leads or enters into a project. We wanted to explore what they understand the firm expects in nominating them for such responsibility. To try and provide some flavour of the stories we draw on two in particular – those of Henri and Michel – two French project managers, who provide two very different subjective views in response to a simple question: 'Why did you become a project manager?'[1]

The open-ended approach to interviewing was designed to generate rich accounts of the experience of the managers (Alvesson, 1996) where these accounts are treated as compelling narratives rather than reports of reality (Silverman, 1993). This interviewing practice thus created a site where the managers could 'construct a personal narrative through a storytelling performance' (Rhodes, 2001, p. 38). Of course, we cannot absent ourselves as researchers from the character of these stories or from the parts of them that we have chosen to recount in this paper. Like any story-based research, the story recounted is 'still interactive and guided by recipient/researcher responses to the storyteller's contextually guided percep-tion of what the researcher will find interesting and "story-worthy"' (ibid, p. 39). In writing up these stories we therefore do not take them to be merely accurate or distorted accounts of the participants' reality but rather see them as inter-subjectively produced texts that embody a dialogue between their experience and our research interests. The result is a story of project management informed by the reflexive generation of accounts, represented in the intersection of the researchers experience and interpretative approaches and the stories that we encountered.[2]

The stories we represent are strategic choices on our part. We have deliberately sought cases of project management that are as favourable as possible to the thesis

that projects represent the emergence of a new form, different from bureaucracy. In this respect, we use a critical case approach (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 78), choosing stories that have a strategic importance in relation to the general problem area of projects as a prefiguration of future organization forms. Thus, we have sampled from innovation projects rather than construction cases (which we have used elsewhere); we have chosen projects that were remote from Corporate HQs, and, with the story of Henri, we are able to gain an insight into a long duration of project experience and its changing contours. Hence, we chose cases that were most likely to support the prefigurative new organizational form argument.

The analysis that we present is thematic (Boje, 2001), moving between etic and emic levels of analysis, in a search for patterns (Spradley, 1980) in projects. We have selected the biographies of project managers as the domain for analysis and sought to create an inventory of contrasts between projects experienced in the past compared with present day conditions. From this inventory we identified key themes around the concept of control. Our interest in control was theoretically derived from the confluence of our interests in bureaucracy and domination (Clegg, 1981, 1975; Clegg and Dunkerley, 1980; Courpasson, 2000a) and so was not entirely inductive. Thus, although we were looking in the tales of these project managers for themes we have encountered in our past professional work we should stress that these themes were also inductively there in the data: we are not 'pure' constructivists.

Henri is a new processes project manager for a large company in the food-processing industry. His tale recounts the gradual apprenticeship of a manager who, little by little, began to understand project management in terms of control, a system in which all autonomy is rigidly supervised by the imposed instructions. Henri was 52 in August 1998 when we met him over a period of two weeks to hear him talk about his career as a project manager. Henri was initially attracted to project managing because he saw himself as a 'man of action', as someone who could get things done, who could leave his personal and material stamp on the world. Henri is a doer rather more than a thinker, a successful man boxed in by the circumstances of his own history. He related an old-style approach to project management as well as providing us with a vision of the changes that occurred since the beginning of his career. Our second story concerns Michel, a research scientist. He describes his job as one 'noted for its slow progress'. His experience with project management illuminated the bureaucratic element of this management tool and the constraints and limits it can impose on those most resistant to control. When we spent half a day with Michel in September 1998 to discuss his position as research scientist and project leader in the field of plant resistance to herbicides, he was in his early-thirties. Michel did a Doctoral Thesis in molecular biology and was then hired by his present firm. His career has been fairly straight-

forward but he feels that the role of project leader is increasingly incompatible with that of a researcher, an anxiety that led him to speculate about his future.

Henri: Autonomy, Intermediation and Power

Henri was initially employed in peripheral sites and was able to be relatively autonomous in selecting and leading project teams. For around 30 years, Henri experienced an increase in the bureaucratization of complex industrial project management and the centralisation of decision-making units for all aspects of the projects he was responsible for: technical, managerial, and human. In learning to be a project manager Henri learnt also to become an intermediary: 'A lot depended on feeling and how we got on with the others', he said of those early days when he first learned the project manager's task. Later, when he gained the job that he had when we met him, it was these intermediary skills that were vital. 'Overall, having accepted this job has proven that most of what I learnt technically during my previous jobs was not the most important in the eyes of the directors. What I mean is that by nominating me project director they hoped to benefit from my 15 years of management and control experience. That was what they wanted, that I was used to working with mixed teams, power struggles, in other words, intermediate and uncomfortable positions.' As he says later in his conversation, he had learnt to control and to be controlled, to be an intermediary.

There is an honourable and historically complex history to the role of inter-mediary, as Zeldin (1995, pp. 154–64) explains. Intermediaries, such as project managers, are like catalysts – they need other intermediaries to set them off. They need mixed teams, finances, plans, and bureaucracies in the background that deliver the goods – literally. Being an intermediary historically has involved

> a series of minute interactions in the presence of others. It means that force is no longer in total command. It means that the humble or the timid can con-tribute to great adventures without being too concerned who is superior to whom: a minute ingredient can have as much effect as a large one. Inter-mediaries inject an element of the unexpected into human affairs, which can have negative as well as stimulating results; and they are always tempted to demand too high a price for their efforts. But they flourish when they please all parties equally, when they oppress nobody. (Zeldin, 1995, p. 161)

Project managers as intermediaries perform dual roles in organizations: they bring categories together but they also keep them apart, as Bloomfield and Vurdubakis (1997) suggest. Being a project manager is as much to do with people and the politi-cal relations involved in managing them and with financial – rather than engi-neering – techniques. As political intermediaries project managers seek to mobilize

different people, systems and things in pursuit of what these others can be constructed as seeing as 'common goals'.

Henri manages power in two distinct and positive ways. For him, power is not a negation of the power of others but a positive force that enables others to achieve things. One set of others that he manages is site workers. He said little about these directly, but we can assume that a measure of his success in this regard is that nothing needs to be said: the relations are not antagonistic and conflictual and thus do not warrant comment. Anyway, there is no need for them to be – they are managed by formal documents that circulate everywhere they are required so that those who exercise surveillance know in what terms they do it. 'Only formal documents are sent, but that is their strength, the respect of the rules and regulations which in turn allows all those involved in the project to meet in committees and to know the position of things.' When procedural rationality frames the truth of projects then people listen to its terms and debate flows within its parameters of normalcy – its modes of rationality. It is in this way that Henri self-manages the power that manages him. This is the power of numbers, of rationality, of finances, 'to be supervised when working on high-stake financial projects, where mistakes are out of the question.' As he goes on to say, 'Autonomy exists if you can fulfil your duties; you lose it if you make a false move.'

Henri's career path has not been easy: he sought willingly to learn more about the role of industrial project manager, only to be excluded for two main reasons. First, because of his age; second, because of the gap between hands-on management and the formal management systems he had to obey for eight years. The price paid was to sacrifice any attempts at innovation that arose during this time. This is important since it suggests, as a hypothesis, that the increasing systemization and cost-control of project management led Henri to abandon innovation. In other words, the company directors prefer project leaders who concentrate on the rules and their objectives at the outset of any project. Leaders are not encouraged to propose better but more costly solutions than those that are already in place to the strategy committee. This is a sure sign of bureaucratization, of strengthening rules and existing methods to prevent any personal initiative that might risk destabilization of the plan. The rule in the company is clear: continue working on what has proven to be successful for new production sites in the past and avoid wasting time studying expensive new possibilities whose outcome is uncertain. Bureaucracy comes into play whenever management constraints mean excluding what could be considered more adventurous paths, where the results are uncertain.

In such cases project management is the fusion of bureaucracy with indeterminacy. Companies use bureaucracy to codify and provide procedures, to accompany individual and group action. Such action is necessary for the project to make ground as well as to assess the level of success of the solutions implemented at the end of the project, and decide whether or not to use them again for future projects. In this light, the project becomes a tool for standardization but its

achievement is always contingent on 'imagination' and 'new techniques' – which must not fail. Thus, 'the trend today is to find the perfectly organized and structured person'.

Michel: Compromising Between Ethics and Pragmatics

For Michel, things are quite similar, even if interpreted in a quite different way, and capable of being expressed more economically. His story is based on the search for a compromise between strong ethical values as a scientist and the necessary pragmatism of a manager. Michel's career shows how difficult it is to resist the powerful constraints of project management. This second story is that of a clamp slowly suffocating an ambition ultimately judged incompatible with the concerns of the decision-makers whose job is to supervise Michel's project.

When a scientist considers project management a necessary step towards promotion a highly specific aspect of its political power is revealed. But, with such a promotion something happens to self-respect: scientifically, one loses it with no gain as a scientist-manager, except as a manager of milestones, deadlines, targets, and suchlike. As an emissary in a complex web, Michel has lost respect for himself as a scientist but found no power as a manager. He did not expect it to be that way: 'at the beginning I thought it was all very positive, that I would benefit from all the advantages of being a scientist without the negative points of being a leader'.

In Michel's story we see project management becoming a managerial institution – a system which is both useful and efficient and which seeks to generate its own legitimacy. Project management legitimacy can be considered a tool of governmentality in Michel's case; the project is vital if he wants to progress hierarchically and it is this fact that forces him to accept the conditions imposed by his superiors. It is not important in itself but in the political relationship it creates between individuals and an organization. It generates a situation where individuals are supervised, penalised or rewarded, selected, etc. It creates efficient and effective relays of power while it steals scientific self-respect: 'they put us under pressure to go faster and faster. In the biotech field, the stakes are enormous, and the biggest change to date is that every day you hear 'where are you at now?'

Michel had to abandon scientific ways of working when he became a project manager and had to adopt centralized tools of governance. Michel quickly discovered that decision-making power was held in the hands of the corporate hierarchy. He has become a managerial delegate, deigned to intermediate between the world of commerce and the world of nature. He doesn't really think of himself as a project 'leader'. As a scientist he experienced project management as a dispossession of disciplinary control. More precisely, our scientist accepts being severely and regularly supervised by a number of committees; he believes not only that he has no choice other than to submit but also that this control may enable

his disciplinary knowledge to succeed in the organization. Michel's experience would suggest that project management can be experienced as a process in which one has to give up something – respect based on disciplinary knowledge – and become pragmatic. What is given up is a scientific dream considered too costly and uncertain. 'That's over now – the best way is the shortest way'.

Discussion of Henri's and Michel's Stories

Henri and Michel are typical of the many project managers we have encountered. Their professionalism is based less on the autonomy of leading project research so much as the will of corporate bodies. The mechanism is simple and relatively classical. It distils, essentially, to two principles. The first is the construction and acknowledgment of a model of required skills for successful project management. This model is mainly based on the ability to read, interpret and finally apply rules and procedures related to the project management system. Such elements are based on the choice of persons who have a rigorous managerial profile and also a 'regulatory' profile, in other words, who respect the 'rules', and will, in turn, impose these rules on others, or at least cultivate obeisance and respect towards them as a normative ethos. Those responsible for leading and governing innovation processes must base their actions on ethics that respect the quality and efficacy of procedures. A rule-guided context becomes a resource in decision-making processes and a protective system in case of contestation.

The second principle guiding the production of professional project management is that of situational and concentrated testing practices. The systems for the detection and steering of future project directors are based on tests, over relatively short periods, for easy assessment of individual efficacy. The project is clearly an obvious choice for this form of test: there is a concentration in time, and a clear situation (precise objectives, timing, evaluation sequences, a clearly defined team) that makes easier any judgement and decisions concerning the 'potential'. The elite is then selected according to the ability to meet the primary requirement of a 'good' project director: managerial rigour and ethics. They will also understand the meanings of urgency and deadlines: take the fastest, shortest route, without worrying too much about the perfection of the modalities and, especially, the human costs involved. To that extent, project management may also be conceived as a managerial selection instrument, simultaneously enabling the control of outputs and behaviours as it seeks to drive selection of the 'best employees' (Fincham, 1992; Ray, 1986), 'reflecting the subjective face of selection' (Fincham, 1992, p. 752). The subjective face demonstrates how those in positions of power to choose people do so in ways that legitimize their selection by showing that they 'know what they mean by the vague terms – natural leadership, soundness, judgement, character – that they employ' (Fincham, 1992, p. 755). Essentially, the best employees will be people for whom project management has become both a

science of control and an instrument of subordination. The project managers as a specific group of experts elaborate hybrid forms of governance, situated between a scientific-entrepreneurial adventure and managerial pragmatism/cynicism. They act to some extent less as relatively independent and more as 'servants of domination', in terms similar to those foreshadowed by de Tocqueville (1961; 1996, p. 418).

MODALITIES OF PROJECT MANAGEMENT CONTROL

The stories of project management represent it as a heterogeneous control system, covering several *modalities*, which generate distinct project tensions. We shall now distil these from the stories collected above. Typologies of such control are familiar in organization theory: one thinks of Edwards' (1979) typologies of how management controls manufacturing employees; however, here we are concerned not with these archetypes of the shifting frontier of industrial control in the trenches of industrial class struggle, but how responsible, autonomous project managers are controlled remotely (see also Friedman, 1977). The first, which seems obvious in the history of projects, is *reputational control*.

Reputational Control

Reputational control is both hierarchically- and peer-based. Hierarchically, the project is an extremely powerful disciplinary system: it permits the creation of almost permanent real-life tests of skill in a decentralized supervisory milieu authorized by the spatio-temporal concentration of each project and its daily interdependencies. In peer terms, reputational control also occurs via the critical tests of communication that inevitably occur within teams each day: the decentralization of control is therefore a means for building a management system based on the affirmative and positive autonomy of teams.

Such strategies of reputational control produce tensions as well as affirmation. The tension generated in the critical periods of projects is a powerful and legitimate means for observing how individuals behave when confronted by difficulties that affect both the whole team and individual members alike. Collaboration is therefore tested daily, which rapidly creates individual reputations. One's reputation, as a project manager, is always on the line, open to widespread inspection, both from those whom one reports to as well as those who report to one. How one handles the uncertainties and challenges that transpire as the project unfolds are evident in the reports one files as well as in the frequent project meetings one fronts.

One particular tension is vested in *superordinate/subordinate relations*. Because of the frequent turnover of projects and the consequent depth of diverse project experiences that members accumulate, they have considerable informal learning

at their disposal, expressed in sharp and sometimes acerbic daily expressions of the worth of the current project, its management and relations. From such experience comes tension for the managers of projects that do not live up to the expectations of experienced team members, even as the project is being represented in functional terms to those in the corporate hierarchy. Resistance to project management is readily built on this basis, as knowledgeable members, able to exploit knowledge gleaned through their own mobility and migration between projects, spread the reputational word on the adequacy of the project managers. In this respect, Henri is an exemplary manager of these tensions – because of his excellence as an intermediary.

Calculative Control

Practices such as administrative accounting systems and calculative instruments that monitor performance increasingly become instruments of power (Armstrong, 1989; Miller and O'Leary, 1987). Versions of 'corporate culturism', in Willmott's terms (1993), legitimize the constraints imposed by managerial control (Fincham, 1992), sometimes, as Clegg et al. (2002) suggest, creating new codes and a new ethos of governmentality. Making project management action increasingly procedurally based, corporate management uses such techniques to assess actions, critical events, decisions, and reasons behind decisions, as carefully as possible, creating the contemporary figure of an 'accountable [project] manager' (McSweeney, 1994). Such project managers report to corporate bodies in terms of cost and quantity controls. Those working on projects understand such control procedures to be a way of knowing what results have been obtained via which mechanisms. Innovation policies can suffer under these controls. There is a distance between a 'pure' logic of control found in the external requirements for upwards reporting that project managers work under, based on systematic and situational 'audits' of performance (Power, 1990), and the logic of improving actions that a 'less pure' concertive control (Barker, 1993) allows for inside the project. Steering in the name of efficiency produces increased external control of innovative action. Managing in the name of innovation produces increased emphasis on concertive learning and adjustment within the project. Thus, external calculative controls impose a managed rather more than a mutual learning process: innovation is surrendered to reporting routines and creativity may suffer, as Michel documents: for him, becoming a project manager has meant losing his identity as a scientist.

In project management the aim of external calculative control over the project is to 'gain enough known-how to reduce the impact of a potential surprise' (Landau and Stout, 1979). Usually, these aspects of control are based almost entirely on the search for and assessment of efficiency in managing the project. Judgements depend on the search for precise information on the project; if this

information does not fit efficiency models, then, typically, the possibility of trans-
formation of the mechanisms and working methods of project teams is raised as
a way to reassert control. The best example of this is the often-sudden change in
authority of the project leader. This can be explained by the systematic search for
facts and figures. The hierarchical control of projects basically seeks to check that
the objectives fixed at the outset have been respected. If the project manager has
successfully integrated this notion of checking, he/she knows their task is to alert
the governing bodies as early as possible to warn them that the objectives will not
be reached, thus allowing for an adjustment in the objectives before assessment.
If they do not do this they cannot argue that the objectives were unrealistic or
poorly thought up. The power of the project leader to so argue resides in clear
knowledge of rules and procedures, an ability to anticipate discrepancies, and to
fix meetings with the governing bodies. Seen from this angle, traditional project
management is a long way from liberal models of entrepreneurial governance.
Instead, it promotes a new bureaucratic model, one that benefits from personal-
ized respect for the rules and ability in their indexical enactment, and a strict
regime of upward and external reporting.

Project managers are intermediaries between a rule-governed organizational
body and local rationalities. Project management is a system for controlling costs
and achieving objectives. Control procedures are pervasively and powerfully
embedded into the regular and efficient reporting of actions and decisions made.
Reporting is essential to the project objectives and is considered by the governing
bodies an indication of the successful operation of the project.

The professional managerial figures that create reports responding to calcula-
tive controls are clearly distant from those situated in the entrepreneurial model
depicted by some 'revolutionaries' (Peters, 1987; for a critique of which, see du
Gay, 2000). The project managers have to understand organizational constraints
and purposes to be able to transform the work of project imagination into
organizational exemplification. To do so is not a question of technical expertise
or creative abilities alone – it is a matter of being more bureaucratic than the
bureaucrats, of going beyond the rules, of being able politically to communicate
these to all the different project actors. (Bauman (1999) explores how the ethical
implications of such everyday zealousness can be devastating in other contexts.)
Intermediate experts who become experts at calculating in terms of external con-
trols, such as project managers, create bureaucracy as an artificial distance between
persons and organizations (Kallinikos, 2001). Tensions between representation and
that which is represented are embedded in such calculation. The panoptical
requirements of project reporting require making visible through figures that
which has transpired, which frequently leads to representation strategies that gloss
local action and activity to those at a distance. Not to put too fine a point on it,
they can sometimes lead to 'Cooking the Books' (Clegg, 1975). The onus to report

at regular, routine and fixed intervals can be extremely demanding of project management performance in the short term. In such a context the project manager may think it better to gloss favourably, with the ambition of the project recovering lost ground, due to the very bureaucratic professionalism of the project managers involved. For Michel, as we have reported, the project is vital if he wants to succeed in his career and, to do so, he must accept conditions imposed by his superiors, he must seek to be seen to be successful in these terms, even if this means sometimes, cutting some representational corners.

Professional Control

The *professional* constitution of the group of project managers and its modality is expressed in tensions surrounding collegial professional relations. Project managers watch not only their projects and staff (who in turn watch the project managers and the projects, as we have suggested). They also exercise surveillance over each other and observe one another. A kind of reticular professional supervision is created. Each project is new, so gradually the project managers shape the rules under the tutelage of those project members whose instantiation brings the rules into concrete existence. Progressively, project leaders rapidly normalize practice-based expertise models.

The tension generated here is that while such action creates new resources of legitimation for the rest of the organization it also creates a professional project for project management. Host organizations sometimes consider such developments negatively because of the way they create links between the construction of a group of competitors and the knowledge-management strategies of key organizational positions. The tension resides in the imposition of a model of organizational proprietary knowledge in terms of ownership and control, rather than the construction of a parallel model of competence, based on professional project experience.

From the corporate organizational perspective, project management entails a high degree of extra-technical and extra-scientific activities, and both project leaders and employing organizations can become ambivalent about claims for endogenous professional control. Professional control can represent a supervisory resource, as it can supply project leaders with arguments, at specific times, to push, constrain, or request members to comply in some way, with the support of the corporate organization host. The control of projects is therefore highly ambivalent, representing both a resource and a constraint. Where project leaders accept such control it tends to be because it helps them, thanks to its formal nature, in communicating decisions, demands and obligations. The technological forms of project control also generate a demand for efficiency. Project management is a control system that allows those involved to account for their acts, to judge and

assess them. Control is both an assessment of actions and decisions and also as a form of awareness of these. The project manager's regular reports to superiors justify both objectives and awareness.

Project management involves the rationalization of choices. The strength of the corporate control system in project management depends on the ability to eliminate arbitrary decisions at the periphery so as to overawe arbitrary decisions at the centre. Supervising a given project involves being responsible for information content and accuracy on the part of corporate managers. For instance, when they receive negative feedback they have to decide whether to continue with the project, which means they have to continue investing, or they may decide to cut the project – and their losses: the implications of which can generate an insuperable tension for project managers. As project managers, both their two key resources of organizational nomination (ranking of them in the status-hierarchy), and the peer pressure to succeed (ranking them in terms of personal status), are hostage to such routinized judgements. While Michel is more vulnerable to the former, Henri is undoubtedly hostage to the latter, as an intermediary par excellence.

BACK TO THE FUTURE?

Modalities of control – reputational, calculative and professional – structure the general organizational contexts within which project managers work, which we have illuminated through our two intimate stories. The question that we started with was to what extent these modalities prefigure some new hybrid, post-bureaucratic form of project organization? To answer this question we turn consideration of the management of projects back to a much older, and classical, concern with the conditions constituting political action.

de Tocqueville was one of the major thinkers of centralization and political regimes and his views seem entirely appropriate to interpret project organizations as centralized forms of governance. Such centralization is legitimized and sustained by specific capillary power practices, which we term 'soft despotism', practices that recall the kind of post-democratic evolution de Tocqueville (1996) describes in *De la démocratie en Amérique*. From a Tocquevillean perspective one can understand the impressive diffusion of the project form throughout organizations and countries, in a way that counterbalances orthodox neo-institutionalist points of view, with their stress on institutional isomorphism.

On Centralization

For students of power, project management's modalities of control and governance are based on major political features early foreshadowed in discussion of the constitutional basis of modernity, seen as a direct evolutionary consequence of democratic societies. de Tocqueville argued that for centralization to be realized as an

effective form of governance, two features are required: specific professions whose duty is to control order and subordinate behaviours and homogeneous rules through which to do so. Central power is all the stronger and durable in so far as it stands at a distance, remote from all the detailed events occurring in a complex society (de Tocqueville, 1996, p. 405). Furthermore, centralized power is especially appropriate in conditions of extreme uncertainty, where urgency and rapidity are requested to cope with external difficulties (de Tocqueville, 1996, pp. 411–12).

Project organizations have been part of a prodigious movement towards the sophistication of administrative science and procedures since the beginning of the century: through such administrative apparatuses, business leaders achieve things more rapidly, at less cost, with greater order and coherence. They do so through intermediary managers controlled by the capillarity of managerial procedures and networks rather than through personalized direct control. As Michaud and Thoenig (2000) point out, 'in the jungle of decentralization, integration is guaranteed only by the centre which, as a financial holding, exerts pressure and structures its domination through two key mechanisms: the appointment of leaders for each unit and the defining of short term performance criteria' (Michaud and Thoenig, 2000, p. 70; our translation). Additionally, there is also the control of capital allocation. Project managers are the appointed leaders whom governing bodies manage and judge at the same time, through short-term performance criteria – the basis of a political regime called despotism, in de Tocqueville's (1996) terms. Project management materializes 'the instinct of centralization' and can be considered (as can bureaucratic forms as a whole) both by business leaders and by organizational members as one of the 'only immobile point in the middle of the singular mobility of their existences and thoughts' (de Tocqueville, 1996, p. 428; our translation).

On Soft Despotism

The most crucial paradox in politics, as de Tocqueville (1996) saw it, was between resistance and submission, between political action and political obedience (Courpasson, 2000b, p. 284). The Tocquevillean paradox leads to a singular conclusion about modern organizations, quite different from Willmott's (1993) characterization of them as totalitarian. Instead, we see them as characterized by soft despotism, 'degrading people without worrying them' (de Tocqueville, 1996, p. 432; our translation). The governmentality of soft despotism is based on recognition of an intermediation between the political centralization of authority and the sovereignty of 'free subjects'. It is the ambiguous marriage between the decentralization of a certain amount of discretion (to be accountable and responsible for one's actions and decisions) and the pre-eminence of a central power, distributed to multiple 'servants' selected by those in power, thanks to specific administrative procedures designed to produce a creative compliance (such as systems linking potential reward to risk within project management: see Clegg et al., 2002). Soft

despotism is characterized in project management by the administration of rules that give managerial discretion to project managers and their counterparts (such as business unit managers, for instance). But this discretion does not diminish the central power of governing bodies; on the contrary, it strengthens it, because the people accepting responsibility for these projects are chosen in line with the rationale of governing bodies. They know that their obligation is to act creatively within systems designed by these governors (Courpasson, 2000b).

In projectified organizations governing bodies give day-to-day administrative discretion to project managers. In so doing they create an endogenous political regime, compared to bureaucracies, that enhances operational project autonomy, job discretion and control. Governing bodies create adequate and legitimate control rules, which are fed by fear and clear and credible threats. A major subjective fear is that of being taken off the project before completion or not being appointed to another one afterwards; additionally, as a project member, irrespective of being a project manager, there is the shared threat of being powerless and in danger because of external pressures and uncertainties. Ultimately, the political concentration of power in the hands of a minority, combined with the regular use of credible threats hanging over people – the classical definition of despotism, according to Montesquieu (1973, pp. 31–2) – is what sustains project management.

It should be apparent that the hybrid forms of control of project management are founded on the refurbishment of bureaucratic procedures rather than their renunciation. They rely on the clever distribution and spread of control rather than its democratization or negation. The project profession we have analysed is trapped in the duty of compliance it owes to governing bodies, because the latter have selected and elaborated the conditions and criteria for the existence and legitimacy of the profession. Project managers, by pragmatically devoting their abilities to the destiny of their own project, effectively renounce any will to govern collective bodies. Their identities are tied up, literally, with their projects.

Are such project organizations an effective prefiguration of post-bureaucratic organization, saturated by diffuse democratic feelings, according to which everyone should be 'empowered' and 'businessed' (Peters, 1994)? Not if the Tocquevillean auspices of our analysis are correct. Instead, project management is a powerful hybrid despotism developing pervasively, based on the appearance of equality in the project team and the reality of a pervasive system of governmental controls. For de Tocqueville, such a mode of governmentality manages the mass through 'an immense and tutelary power, responsible for their pleasures and fates. It is total, precise, regular, caring and gentle . . . thus, day after day, it reduces the need for, and the use of, a free-will' (de Tocqueville, 1961; 1996, pp. 432, 442; our translation). Tocquevillean democracy was founded on constraints – the idea of a collectively shared commitment to simultaneously respect individual freedom and personal responsibility (March and Olsen, 1995, pp. 2–3; Mill, 1956), which may be strengthened by the political centralization of power: 'equality produces

indeed two trends; the one leads people directly to an independence and may push them suddenly to anarchy, the other leads them through a larger, more secret but more sure way, to servitude' (de Tocqueville, 2001, p. 396; our translation). Contrary to contemporary discourses on organizational democracy, de Tocqueville suggests that stability and permanence come from centralized authority imposing rules on people. The individualization of management, enhancing and rewarding mobility, flexibility, the abolition of frontiers, and the resulting banishment of bureaucracy (Osborne and Plastrik, 1997), is thus similar to the power of governing bodies – the political hybridization that projectified organizations may induce.

DIFFUSING PROJECT MANAGEMENT

The way in which similar organizational forms are diffused and sedimented across organizations is fundamental because it is only through their pervasiveness that these forms can result in specific (eventually hybrid) political regimes. This is an issue mostly analysed by neo-institutionalism (Fligstein, 1985). In this approach, some organizations are leaders in playing a central role in the stratification and diffusion of new forms. What about specific managerial technologies, such as project management? Project management has achieved remarkable visibility through a process of 'subjectification' that constructs 'recognizable and recurrent social and organizational roles' (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000, p. 701). Amongst these are the codification and rationalization of different beliefs and practices, stabilized in a general managerial technology called project management.

We consider our 'internal and subjective' approach complementary to neo-institutionalist approaches to organizational sedimentation; we have not investigated the patterns of diffusion of project management but the way in which actors are constituted in relation to specific modes of control. For, in a Tocquevillean way, it is through this constitution that specific organizational and political regimes may be produced and sustained. In this paper, these regimes are conceived as forms and practices of governance that are objectified and embodied in specific operational, administrative and managerial systems, such as project management. Through the analysis of small stories, we see how specific rules of conduct, performance principles and devices of control, have been developed and, at the same time, how they have produced new types of actors within organizations.

The strength of project management that allows it to be diffused widely is that it is highly *reproducible*. It is a totality of well-defined rules and procedures constituting a specific managerial package. It also displays the character of *durability*, because it is based upon a *technology* of writing, planning, budgeting and accounting (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000). Because it is well understood and conveyed from one firm to one another, it constitutes in itself *a process of rationalization* that uses established significations, meanings, cognitions, and criteria to compensate for the complexity of social games and of individual interests. It enables the decon-

textualization of control and renders its harsh face in ways more acceptable to individuals – it offers soft domination within the project as it is intermediated by the project managers. Project management is a hybrid form in so far as its institutionalization is concerned: it stands between more highly codified systems, such as a computer application, and less codified systems, such as TQM, being both more finite in any of its particulars but also more easily communicable (Hasselbladh and Kallinikos, 2000, p. 711).

Our stories show how specific actors institutionalize project management technologies internally. They demonstrate that people not only carry this institutionalization but, in doing so, exercise an active complicity with governing bodies. That is why project management appears to be a governmental technology that depends on the subjectivity of its protagonists for its objectification. A pervasive feeling of equality exists within contemporary project teams in contemporary business organizations. We have argued that these feelings are governed through a political hybridization of bureaucratic principles (the external controlling part of these managerial technologies) with democratic principles (the internal deliberative part of these technologies). A central place is given to the actors constituted through these technologies, to their feelings, and the way they see their future. Bureaucracy becomes governmentally neo-liberal when it harnesses individual feelings to embody and institutionalize the central rules and tools required to govern collective and individual fates. No longer experienced just as external and coercive necessity, the rules become part of the project of projects at the actor level. These modalities of control are based on major political features that were early foreshadowed in discussion of the constitutional political basis of modernity. Project management practices, compared with the rule-tropism of bureaucracy, are increasingly sophisticated thanks to the pervasiveness of principles and control norms and the diffusion of pragmatic/cynical conduct within organizational members (Courpasson and Dany, 2001; Parker, 1998). Because project staffing is permanently transforming, evolving, moving, changing, only the durability of governing authoritative bodies is the guarantor of a relatively stable political regime. While the individualization of project managers enhances and rewards mobility, flexibility, and shifting of the frontiers of bureaucracy (Osborne and Plastrik, 1997) upwards and out, it creates only the appearance of a form that is post-modern, post-bureaucratic. Instead of the rules being there, pervasively so, and in a causal relation to the action that ensues, they are instead internalized in the disciplines of the project managers and communicated in relatively non-distorted forms of communication within the project.

CONCLUSION

The project is a managerial institution comprised of a number of controls and procedures. Simultaneously, it centralizes innovative ideas and shifts a culture of

individual knowledge ownership to organizational ownership. In a way, innovation becomes a matter for the organization rather than the individual scientist or engineer. Empirical findings concerning project management, teamwork, the delegation of responsibilities, and of course, bureaucratization, demonstrate that project management does not entail the abolishment of hierarchical organization but allows the recomposition of certain aspects and the confirmation of others. Moreover, it neither abolishes control nor those tensions associated with it. Instead, it has distinct modalities of control, each of which generates quite specific tensions. These are not so much an innovation in organization form but a repositioning of some classic questions.

If the future will be a projectified society, as Lundin and Söderholm (1998) suggest, then it will not be one noticeably different from the pasts with which we are familiar, other than in the loss of a traditional conception of career – it will certainly retain elements of hierarchy even as it reconfigures them around new project dependencies. Even as they eliminate central notions, such as bureaucratic careers in favour of contingent work, and develop new forms of governmentality, in essence, projects appear to be arenas for remote control rather than the rehearsal of a post-bureaucratic future perfect.

NOTES

[1] The full transcript of the interviews is available from the authors.
[2] We are indebted to Carl Rhodes for his advice on story-telling research that helped frame the methodological considerations reported in this and the previous paragraph.

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