

## The System and its Nemesis

Let us begin by remembering what Max Weber taught us a century ago. Two background, taken-for-granted concepts important for all students of public policy and administration came from him: (1) legal-rational culture, and (2) instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality is the common sense of bureaucracy, which implements policy from the top down using means-ends logic. Legal-rational culture is what comes about when everyone starts thinking this way.

In his study of religious ethics, Weber noted that the Calvinist sect of Protestantism was particularly amenable to the emergence of acquisitive capitalism because of its “this-worldly” view of moral responsibility. In Calvinism, commitment is expressed as work-related economic activity that in turn leads to salvation. This ethical stance cultivated a value foundation for the emergence of rationalism and acquisitive capitalism (Weber 1930). Weber’s thesis directly challenged the economic determinism of Karl Marx by emphasizing a cultural-religious rather than economic-class explanation for the development of capitalism.

Of course, many other Western developments also helped Weber explain the emergence of modern capitalism. Production was separated from the household; Luca Pacioli had invented double-entry bookkeeping; cities began to develop autonomous political power. And—importantly—Europe inherited a tradition of Roman law, which helped capitalism emerge there because this legal tradition provided “a more integrated and developed rationalization of juridical practice than came into being elsewhere” (Giddens, 1992: xviii).

This in turn was one factor making possible the development of the nation-state, administered by full-time bureaucratic officials,

beyond anything achieved in the Eastern civilizations. The rational-legal system of the Western state was in some degree adapted within business organizations themselves, as well as providing an overall framework for the coordination of capitalistic enterprise. (Giddens 1992, xviii)

The term *legal-rational culture*, then, describes Western culture, whose dominant institutions include hierarchically structured corporations, bureaucratic government, and an elaborate legal system. The reason Max Weber remains so widely read is that so many scholars think his interpretation is highly credible and well worth understanding. Indeed, it does seem that we live in a legal-rational culture, and we are surprised or even offended when we see an absence of equal protection under the law. As Weber himself put it, “Without this juristic rationalism, the rise of the absolute state is just as little imaginable as is the [French] Revolution. . . . Since the French Revolution, the modern lawyer and modern democracy absolutely belong together” (Weber 1946, 94).

Instrumental rationality is a concept closely tied to bureaucracy and legal-rational culture. It is a means-ends mental predisposition (Weber 1947). Weber contrasted instrumental rationality with other possible orientations to one’s social milieu: affective, traditional, value-rational (Miller 1990). The affective orientation is not consciously rational, but is instead an enactment of social life in response to one’s emotional state. The traditional orientation is habitual and ritualistic: one does today what one did yesterday without critically reflecting on it. In Weber’s typology, two additional mental predispositions are consciously rational. In value-rationality one comports oneself according to inherent worthiness of a value—environmentalists and antiabortion activists may approach the world this way. Instrumental rationality, most interesting to Weber because it is the underlying ethic of bureaucracy, is consciously rational and calculating. Unlike value-rationality, instrumental-rationality implies that worthy ends are negotiable. Ends and means are both taken into consideration. The upshot is that the ethic of bureaucracy is the ethic of instrumental rationality, according to Weber.

Weber’s famous statement about bureaucracy still resonates: “The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization has

always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization” (Weber 1946, 214). In elaborating the concept, Weber adds that:

[A] system of rationally debatable “reasons” stands behind every act of bureaucratic administration, that is, either subsumed under norms, or through a weighing of ends and means. The position of all “democratic” currents, in the sense of currents that would minimize “authority,” is necessarily ambiguous. “Equality before the law” and the demand for legal guarantees against arbitrariness demand a formal and rational “objectivity” of administration, as opposed to the personally free discretion flowing from the “grace” of the old patrimonial domination. (Weber 1946, 220)

Weber is telling us that bureaucrats must, to be formally consistent with authoritative rational and legal principles, sublimate their subjectivity and perhaps even their democratic impulses on occasion. This way of organizing prevents them from using direct grants of authority from some patriarch or king to enforce their own whims. Although Weber clearly appreciated the elegance of the system, it is not clear that he was entirely sanguine about it. Consider this passage about the iron cage, a famous one first published in 1904–1905, from the closing paragraphs of *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*:

In the field of its highest development, in the United States, the pursuit of wealth, stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passions, which often actually give it the character of sport. No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said [quoting Goethe]: “Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart, this nullity

imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.” (Weber 1930, 182)

Legal-rational culture was not a utopian dream for Weber. Legislatively enacted, bureaucratically implemented, and judicially enforced policy is called *legal-rational* (Weber, 1946) because of the impersonal procedural process that generates it. Legal-rational implies a detached, technical, universalizing, standardizing authority structure. What is not important in the legal-rational policy implementation is the lived experience of the bureaucrat. Nor, in assessing a client’s eligibility to receive food stamps for example, is there an account of the client—except with regard to food stamp eligibility criteria. What is important is the statute and its authoritative decision apparatus, the administrative code, and the procedures manual. This body of knowledge prescribes conduct. Its coherence gives it its wholeness. Its discourse is that of the boss man, the master. The person in power uses this discourse to control the distribution of goods, the communications processes, and the subordinates and clients themselves. Meanwhile, if the system is working properly the client does indeed receive food stamps or whatever social benefit is due. This humanistic project provides the legitimating rationale for the hierarchical social relations that are otherwise anathema to democracy. The system works, but has it worked too well?

Consider the notion of *totalizing systems*, a term developed by Baudrillard (1994) to suggest domination via artificial control devices, and a term that is precisely consistent with “the absolute state” that Weber (1946) discussed.

## ENCROACHMENTS

A totalizing system wants to conquer contingency and embrace predictability and standardization. No system can achieve a totalizing effect (in saying so I depart from Weber’s ideal), although not for lack of trying.

Would-be totalizing systems might include the Western system of legal-rational authority that writes and implements statutes and laws. Baudrillard’s totalizing system was explicated by referencing the U.S. space program, particularly the landing of a man on the moon.

This event was a “programmed microcosm, where nothing can be left to chance” (Baudrillard 1994, 34).

Trajectory, energy, calculation, physiology, psychology, environment—nothing can be left to contingencies, this is the total universe of the norm—the Law no longer exists, it is the operational immanence of every detail that is law. . . . We are dumfounded by the perfection of the programming and the technical manipulation, by the immanent wonder of the programmed unfolding of events. . . . Now, it is the same model of programmatic infallibility, of maximum security and deterrence that today controls the spread of the social. There lies the true nuclear fallout: the meticulous operation of technology serves as a model for the meticulous operation of the social. Here as well, *nothing will be left to chance*, moreover this is the essence of socialization, which began centuries ago but which has now entered its accelerated phase. . . . (Baudrillard 1994, 34).

Here Baudrillard expresses more faith in the space program than the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) systems managers themselves would express. But Baudrillard wrote those words before the faulty joint in a rocket motor on space shuttle *Challenger* allowed a combustion gas leak that destroyed the aircraft and seven crew members (including educator Christa McAuliffe) in 1986. Baudrillard first published those words in 1981, well before the main mirror of the *Hubble* space telescope was found to be improperly shaped—a discovery made after the space vehicle was launched into space. A corrective device was installed in 1993, but in 1999, the telescope lost its ability to track stars and slipped into its inoperative “safe” mode to await another rescue mission, accomplished the following December. Meanwhile, in September 1999 the *Mars Climate Orbiter* burned up in the atmosphere of Mars due to sloppy management and silly mistakes, including mixing up English and metric units in the navigation software. And two months later, the *Mars Polar Lander* was lost . . . no signal. It was simply lost. One cannot be certain of the success of these space missions until after they succeed, and sometimes they do not. The eventual launching of *Mars Odyssey* in April 2001 is a symbol of perseverance more so than the meticulous operation of technology.

The point is that the meticulous operation of technology is not a done deal. More important, the “meticulous operation of the social” is nowhere on the horizon. Totalizing systems may not be so totalizing after all, not with fallible human beings running them. Actually, practitioners in public systems, NASA included, face staggering challenges in keeping the system going—keeping the street lights working, getting the garbage picked up, catching the crooks who victimize innocent people, or securing the nation’s air traffic control system. The system is more fragile than we may think it is. Total control may be the aspiration of imaginary scoundrels such as Darth Vader, but it is hardly a fait accompli.

Still, Baudrillard’s totalizing system is an expression of a profound critique of the administered society. The deep schism between totalizing worldviews and alternatives lies on the fault line that separates chaos, randomness, and contingency from order, pattern, and system. *Monism* is the term Berlin (2000) used to describe the one-world thesis that Baudrillard called totalizing system. Berlin contrasted monism with *pluralism*. Berlin and Baudrillard developed their theses in quite different ways, but both of them are warning their readers about the dangers of a singular system of thought and power. Berlin was born in Latvia and moved to Russia during World War I. He left Russia in 1921, shortly after the communist revolution, and his thinking was no doubt influenced by his reservations about the communist regime there. His intellectual journey took him to Western Europe and to a belief in a strong, vigorous civil society. He argued against neutrality in public administration and public morality, against determinism in explanatory accounts, against the idea that human problems are but tensions to be diagnosed, treated, and released (Spicer 2000). The pluralism he advocated was a more radical pluralism than is usually entertained in U.S. political science. U.S. pluralism portrays business and special interest groups competing in some legitimate, government-run forum (such as the legislature) for programs and dollars. Pluralism for Berlin implies the presence of beliefs that are, at core, irreconcilable. Monism, the idea that all good things in life must be compatible with one another in the final analysis by appeal to some higher value or standard, is undermined by pluralism (Spicer 2000). Pluralism means that men and women must choose among incompatible values. For Berlin, the possibility of conflict and

tragedy can never wholly be eliminated from human life. There is no common currency against which human values can be compared and rated. Contingency and ambiguity must be accommodated. Pluralism, as I see it, is home to views of the world compatible with multiculturalism, postmodernism, and social constructionism. Monism, which endorses the totalizing system, entails encompassing belief structures such as one omniscient God, nomothetic philosophy, the legal-rational system that has all angles covered, or a singular universe guided by the laws of nature.

The challenge to monism has been in evidence since Friedrich Nietzsche undermined its premises in the late 1800s. He maintained that values or principles or statements that are taken to be universally transcendent, which is to say true, are actually conditional, partial and historically contingent. Nietzsche presented this insight in *The Joyous Science*, the first edition of which was published in 1882; in *Beyond Good and Evil*, published in 1885; and in *Genealogy of Morals*, published in 1887. In these books Nietzsche commented critically on the totalizing discourse on morality, pointing out the gaps and fissures embedded in purportedly unifying systems of belief. The attempt finally to order the world, to arrange its virtues, morals, moods, and structures, is an error to be avoided. For Nietzsche, the world is not a living being, not a machine, and certainly not something essential, universal, and eternal. It is chaos and randomness.

The total character of the world . . . is in all eternity chaos—in the sense of not a lack of necessity but a lack of order, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms. (Nietzsche 1974, 168)

The totalizing aspirations that Nietzsche warned about endure. Even the word *universe* presents a unitary version of the world. Honig (1993) suggests using the term *multi-verse* rather than *universe*. Random notes, unsung melodies, and bad poetry also compose the multiverse. Universe, on the other hand, is the singular lyric of the master. Lacan (1972: 108) referred to the totalizing unification philosophy as “the discourse of the master.” Lyotard (1984) believes that people are ready to abandon it:

That is what the postmodern world is all about. Most people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative. It in no way follows that they are reduced to barbarity. What saves them from it is their knowledge that legitimation can only spring from their own linguistic practice and communicative interaction. (P. 41)

Once the discourse of the master loses our ear, hearing the blue notes is possible. But we might also have to listen to off-tempo flats and sharps. For example, I may not be able to tolerate certain social practices of Sierra Leone or Afghanistan that I regard as misogynist, but, in the absence of a universal ethics, my objections necessarily derive from my own ethnocentric background and not from some universal commonality of values.

Wishing for a common ethic or a unitary order is not a bad thing, necessarily. But the claims of such unitary ethics are too grandiose. The logical-positivist traditions of the social sciences had totalizing tendencies in their unwarranted claims about a unified truth. In organization theory, the totalizing aspirations are expressed in the hierarchical control mechanisms, the unifying mission statement, and the administrative codes and procedures manuals that prescribe conduct. Universal objectivity is the ambition of legal-rational authority, where judgment is transmuted into laws and statutes that are expected to govern everyday events for everyone in the kingdom. How do we get out of this totalizing universe? Nietzsche shocked the world when he urged us to begin by abandoning the most fundamental of totalizing ideas, the belief in God. Lesser totalizing moves would be easy to refute after that. "God is dead; but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown.—And we—we still have to vanquish his shadow, too" (Nietzsche 1974, 167).

At issue for the purposes of this book is a monistic, encompassing rationality that seeks to name all other doctrines "political" and reserve for itself above-the-fray labels such as *neutral*, *objective*, *impartial* or *impersonal*. Not even the U.S. Supreme Court can lay claim to those high-sounding principles any longer. But that would not matter, according to Weber (1930), because power resides in the bureaucracy:

In a modern state the actual ruler is necessarily and unavoidably the bureaucracy, since power is exercised neither through parlia-



mentary speeches nor monarchical enunciations but through the routines of administration. . . . The “progress” toward the bureaucratic state, adjudicating and administering according to rationally established law and regulation, is nowadays very closely related to the modern capitalist development. The modern capitalist enterprise rests primarily on *calculation* and presupposes a legal and administrative system, whose functioning can be rationally predicted, at least in principle, by virtue of its fixed general norms, just like the expected performance of a machine. (P. 109–110)

So . . . does the bureaucracy run everything? No, not everything, Weber notwithstanding. Consider an alternative view: Honig (1993) drew an interesting distinction between *Virtue* and *virtú*. *Virtue* is the moral code of the culturally dominant. *Virtú* refers to the practices that take place outside the system, in the margins. *Virtú* signifies the individuals and events that cannot be gathered into the prevailing *Virtue* system. Hence *Virtue* is a totalizing gesture, a foundational move, an attempt to encumber all persons and all events into the same system. *Virtú* is the fly in the ointment, the remainder, the misbehaving outlier. *Virtú* is *Virtue*’s nemesis, and they always travel together.

There is an unexamined assumption embedded in legal-rational policy about its own legitimacy. Most of us accept its premises and assumptions (as *Virtuous*). It is so *Virtuous* that imagining a different sort of rationale for conducting the public’s business is difficult. A law is like a general principle that applies in all situations, to all people, and this seems fair-minded and proper. Indeed, we are more likely to criticize the legal-rational shortcomings (a law is not applied universally, or fairly, for example) than the legal-rational aspiration itself. But in the effort to standardize the application of the law, to make it apply equally to everyone, the law has to feign that it grasps the conditions and practices of its target population. The upshot is that we prioritize first the abstract, principled policy prescription, rather than events on the ground. Legal-rational public policy is already cognizant of what the problem is, and the administrator has no need to listen to context-specific voices. Rather, the administrator should take control of the situation and rationally, efficiently implement the policy.

The challenge, as I see it, is quite different. The pursuit of a rationally ordered society too easily paves the way for monism and absolutism. The intellectual challenge is to theorize a pluralism that does not fuse with a singular order. Once that is accomplished, the “discourse of the master” will have been transcended. My point is not to defeat rationality, except in its universalizing aspirations.

Many post–World War II intellectuals thought that an absence of rationality and the yielding to emotionalism are what brought on the mass hysteria of Hitlerism and anti-Semitism. But it could also be persuasively argued that rationalism brought on the evil banality of bureaucratic proceduralism. A stupid form of inhumane rationality was needed to sustain Hitler’s concentration camps (Adams and Balfour 1998) as well as Stalin’s labor-camp socialism that took place in the Gulags (Ivanova 1999).

Rationality is a cultural artifact that promises to help us interpret our lived experience and design new ways of doing things. Coherence, logic, and reason are signs of intellectual success. Reason and nurturance need not be vastly different categories. The distinction worth working on is between universalism and pluralism. Hence, one could make a distinction between two theoretical orientations that both employ reason and rationality: (1) universalism (monistic and impersonal); and (2) pragmatism (relational, contextual, and empathic). The former category, the universalizing one, has difficulty sustaining its position against the latter category. That is, all attempts to establish a universal truth or ethics have, to date, shown themselves to be cultural, conditional, partial, and historically contingent. Unifying systems of belief are loaded down with holes and fissures (or “dysfunctions” in Merton’s (1957) structuralist terms) and their internal rules and principles begin contradicting one another early in the game. This does not mean that the pragmatic alternative that I advocate will be easy to accomplish. Nor is pragmatism widely regarded as the superior approach at this historical moment. By the end of chapter 6, the reader will be better able to judge whether this book has made any intellectual headway in moving from a rational-universal model of policy implementation toward a rational-pragmatic one.

The general aim in the legal-rational model, according to Bogason (2000), is to inject coherence and integration into the system. However, postmodern conditions imply decentralized, frag-

mented policy implementation, and the Weberian top-down approach to decision making may not be suitable in these conditions. Moreover, other observers see that actual bureaucracy these days operates quite differently from the Weberian ideal. Frissen (1999) observed that policy processes are becoming increasingly circular as the relationships between administration and society develop more of a contractual than a regulatory character. Although the outcome often resembles something like self-governance, luck rather than design got us there. Frissen (1999, 2) appreciates the irony of rationalization when he writes, "The pyramidal structure of the politico-administrative system, in which bureaucracy is the tool of a political decision making center, is being undermined. It is fascinating to note this process is the result of attempts to achieve precisely the opposite; *viz.* to equip public administration to deal with social complexity more effectively with the primacy of politics as its legitimating guideline." Consider, then, the problem of hyper-rationality, where the attempt to make rationality universal in its application leads to anything but rationality.

#### HYPERRATIONALITY

Systematized, rationalized conventions are at stake in legal procedure. The promise of law is that disputes can be resolved peaceably through legal processes. The legal process does resolve disputes . . . except for when it does not. The legal system preserves itself by insinuating itself into the culture as the neutral arena for dispute resolution. Litigants can run each other through an appeal process as the court system masticates the conflict further, but whether the conflict will thereby resolve itself is a different matter. There is a grand narrative behind the rule of law. This grand narrative promises consistency, standards, and fairness to all. The problem with legal principle is that it does not accomplish those things (Fish 1999). Even if it did, there are practical problems with the promulgation of rules and more rules and with the attempt to standardize behavior in the face of contingency. In the legal-rational system, rules seem to insist on being preemptory over lived experience. The conflicts that seek resolution in the courts are required to express themselves in specific and sometimes peculiar

ways, that is, in the language of the law. Only then can the conflict proceed toward resolution (which may or may not be forthcoming).

At the end of the legal proceeding, the unspoken point is not who won and who lost, nor that precedent was established. The unspoken point is that the legal system has made the culture speak its language. Legal language is triumphant in its ability to insinuate itself into the culture. The same sort of thing happens when organizational language is enforced.

Consider the exchange between a telephone customer and Dawn Barbour, a Bell Atlantic agent, as Walsh (2000) reports. They had been having an angry conversation, but the customer was beginning to calm down.

“I hate Bell Atlantic, but you’re the nicest rep I ever had,” the caller said. A simple “thank you” seemed the right reply, but Ms. Barbour had to follow a script. “Did I provide you with outstanding service today?” she inquired. “Isn’t that what I just said?” barked the customer, steaming right back up again. (P. B1)

Ms. Barbour said she felt like a total idiot, but she had to follow the rules in asking the question. This is the assembly line, rule-driven approach to client relations. The policy pretends to be relational by its phony politeness and fake customer service orientation, but is so non-relational that participants in the conversation are unable to interact in an authentic conversation. The transaction does not rely on empathy, caring, or social intercourse. Rather, a utility-maximizing logic informs the process, which is composed of a one-way monologue that disguises itself (although not very well) as a conversation. Because rules and laws are trump, public administrators and business employees alike substitute them for their own judgments and their own experiences as they go about obeying and enforcing rules and being accountable. This is what bureaucracy demands from its subordinates in the name of accountability. For many practitioners and scholars alike, this is how it should be, and they have some good arguments on their side. Finer (1941/1972) warned that bureaucratic discretion would remove control from legitimate political authorities. He urged that public administrators should be controlled by rules, administra-

tive codes, and written operating procedures (see also Lowi, 1969, 1993). This works, except for when it does not. The emphasis on rules can sometimes play out to an illogical conclusion.

When administrators' and their subordinates' behaviors do not correspond to expectations, more rules are promulgated to standardize the behavior. Rules are then revised to cover the more detailed behaviors of more specifically defined persons. Yet, the effort to create a totalizing legal-rational system is ultimately futile. Yes, removing undesired vagueness generates specificity. And yes, detailed instructions can sometimes clarify previous vagueness. However, rule making that attempts to be most sensitive to contingency results in rules that cover meticulous details. The health care industry, for example, struggles under minute rules about everything from aspirin and blood tests to insurance coverage and expenditure caps. This maze of procedural rules does not end incompetence, malpractice, or Medicare fraud. Adding more rules in an attempt to standardize interpretations merely increases the options of the administrator in deciding which rule to invoke. The ironic result is Finer's worst nightmare: more administrative discretion and more leeway for would-be petty tyrants—including prosecutors and district attorneys—who unilaterally decide which rules to enforce and which to ignore.

In a legal-rational system of governance, legal principles insinuate themselves into this everyday practice and insist on taking priority. The legal system wants its directives to take priority over every moment, every experience, and every interaction that the day brings forth. Those moments that are inconsistent with the policy directive will be dealt with accordingly. To paraphrase McSwite (1997), the policy directive is right; everything else can be made right.

Legal-rational policy stands for consistency and standardization. Yes, it is a good thing, this notion of equal treatment under the law. Only precise, specific guidelines can ensure common treatment of like cases, according to Kaufman (1977). Rules aspire to egalitarianism to ensure that similar cases are treated in a similar fashion. Rule-by-law seems better than its alternatives (despotism? monarchy? authoritarianism?) in the minds of most of us. The rationality of the legal-rational process is seductive. It is so seductive that the federal statutes, including formal rules, now contain about 100 million words (Howard 1994). The effort to purge contingency and ambiguity from

rules and regulations has led to an impressive paroxysm of behavioral directives. One might well conclude that the stupefaction of the body politic—those anxiety-ridden, docile bodies that have displaced self-governing citizens—is a deliberate program of mass quiescence, effectuated through the promulgation of rules. But such a conspiracy theory would mistake depravity for rationality-taken-too-far.

### Performance Budgeting As Rationality-Taken-Too-Far

Performance budgeting is a splendid example of rationality-taken-too-far that is barely distinguishable from depravity. In many states and localities in the United States, performance-based budgeting is used to demonstrate cost-effectiveness and accountability. But that interpretation—that performance budgeting means cost-effectiveness and accountability—is but the first phase in the mutation of meaning (Beresford 2000).

Meaning mutates when interpretations of the same thing (say, Object A) begin to accumulate. Fixed meaning is displaced by skepticism about those interpretations, which in turn is displaced by a deep suspicion that someone is intentionally manipulating our understanding of what Object A really means. That suspicion is eventually displaced by a sense that Object A has vanished altogether; the interpretations, and not Object A, have become more interesting. The mutation of meaning can be illustrated by filling in “Object A” with the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993.

The passage of this act during the early years of the Clinton administration was supposed to reduce the size of government and impose accountability. This act linked expenditures to the benefits provided to the people, that is, to performance outcomes (and not just inputs and outputs). A rational justification for government would be supported with quantitative evidence. Results-oriented government meant that budgeting would now be based on performance. Following the federal legislation, most states adopted performance budgeting procedures, committing themselves to accountability and performance measurement. The efficiency and effectiveness of government programs could now be assessed. In performance budgeting, the first administrative task is to develop performance indicators to

measure outcomes. These indicators should help legislators focus on what results are to be expected from the funds allocated.

The second task is to set target objectives. If the indicator measures, say, miles of highway laid, the target objective specifies how many miles of highway should be laid with the designated allocation of funds. But it does not take long for the mutation of rationality to begin. Perhaps the aspiration of performance budgeting was unreasonable. In cost-benefit analysis, the difficulties of measuring “benefit” soon become evident. Benefits are inherently difficult to identify and quantify, and they are even more difficult to attribute to a particular program or agency activity (Beresford 2000). Not everything can be counted as if it were simply a different colored widget. For example, “miles of highway” is an inadequate indicator of the quality of the road or the difficulty of the terrain. But legislative mandates may not be negotiable. In Beresford’s study, the mandate was an instance of one-way communication, and there was no opportunity for talking back. So, easily enumerated “performance measures” were developed by quiescent public servants. Meanwhile the meaning of performance budgeting began to mutate: simply count the miles of highway laid.

Rather than taking stock of the performance and accomplishments of the agency, performance budgeting, as practiced, distorts the budgetary process. Measures and outcomes must be intentionally falsified to serve the demands of the higher-ups who must somehow counter the belief that the programs are not efficient and are not producing the intended benefits, which could not be accurately measured in the first place. Performance budgeting becomes a ruse. Reports that show magnificent results may appear to be impressive, but such reports corrupt the meaning of the term *results*.

The meaningful symbols—performance, results, and effectiveness—are debased. Rationality itself is being corrupted as the meaning of performance becomes disfigured. The ambiguity about government performance that was supposed to become transparent and unmistakable has spread; now the words themselves have become ambiguous. Outputs are now called *outcomes*. Objectives are reshaped to accommodate substandard performance. The benefit derived from the public expenditure is more hidden than before. The target outcome is now framed just so, to hide the absence of

evidence of progressive improvement or of any progress toward an objective.

Millions, perhaps billions of dollars in expenditures are justified in terms of bogus performance indicators. The construct validity of these indicators, for anyone with the slightest background in social science measurement or program evaluation, fails to relate performance to budgeting. Yet the charade continues with hapless bureaucrats blithely going through the motions of performance budgeting, as commanded by their legislatures who needed to show that they are holding government accountable—according to the standards of rationalists from academia who initially wrote the prescriptions.

But the indicators seem not to measure outcomes, and the people who developed the indicators know this best. Performance has nothing to do with the scores on the indicators. The problem is not simply that the public does not know what it is paying for; a more important problem is that the integrity of language is under attack. The word *performance* has been mangled to accommodate an ill-fitting rationalistic scheme. Government employees who work with these now-mutated symbols know what performance budgeting means in practice, but they cannot utter their demur. The system requires their subordination and quiescence. Their work is as meaningless as the symbols that describe it, but the image of accountability and performance is preserved. We, the rest of us, now suspect that the symbol *performance budgeting* conceals the absence of any such thing.

But we can all relax. We have entered the final state in the mutation of meaning. After all is said and done, we realize that the legislature never allowed performance budgeting to influence their decision making in the first place. Funding authority was established first; performance was not taken into account in budget decisions. Any budgetary changes were based on some other criteria. Agencies were not held accountable. The function of “performance budgeting” is to distract attention from the fact that there is no performance budgeting. “Performance budgeting” simulates something that does not exist.

In the end, “performance budgeting” stands as a self-referential epiphenomenon (Fox and Miller 1993). It signifies nothing but itself. It does not have, and does not need, any reality to back it up. There may be some visceral associations that are exhumed by the image, but no actual events. The symbols are their own referents: *performance-based budgeting*, *accountability*, *results*, and *effectiveness*.



The words validated the process, and the process validated the words. The “reality,” or the things that were being counted, had no relevance; the reality was in the symbols. The symbols, in fact, denoted such powerful meaning that the meaninglessness of [“performance budgeting”] was invisible. (Beresford 2000)

The symbols betray reality, vacating it of substance, and inserting abstraction in its place. Image is the essence, the new reality. Illusion disappears, too, because true reality, the standard against which illusion was once compared, has vacated the field.

### Managerial Histrionics

On the organizational stage, rationality has become a power move, a show of bluster that is simultaneously a show of good mental health. What appears to Baudrillard as “totalizing” is, from another vantage point, the affectations of autocrats trying to fake it. Done properly, it is performed as both machismo and sanity. The control orientations of management paradigms amount to little more than the huff and puff of a contest for dominance. Watch Sir Toby Belch as he advises Sir Andrew Aguecheek in this passage from Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*:

So soon as ever thou seest him, draw [a sword], and as thou drawest, swear horrible; fir it comes to pass off that a terrible oath, with a swaggering accent sharply twang’d off, gives manhood more approbation that ever proof itself wold have earn’d him. (Cited in Shafritz 1992, 56)

Managerial control mechanisms, from formal rules and technical specifications to returned travel vouchers and awarding of parking lot privileges are . . . bluster. These moves are histrionics, like theater drama, the posturing of control and domination. The peacock distends its feathers for display purposes. Similarly, this “will to appearance” is the essence of managerialism, the theater of organization and control. Management is a display of symbols and a playhouse of presentation. The language and symbolic iconography of managerial effectiveness demand encore performances to affirm the previous performance.

Consider the histrionics involved in Hindu reinforcement of the caste system, which Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky (1990) reported. Symbolic acts of deference are self-imposed “to keep his group up” (p. 9). Rank differentials might become blurred without vigilant observances.

The high-caste Hindu enjoys, by virtue of his membership in his bounded group, considerable rights to land, water, priestly duties, and the deference of his fellow villagers. . . . Scrupulous observation of the rules that protect each level of the hierarchy from contamination by the levels below it is his way to resolve the problem. The high-caste Hindu follows a manipulative strategy in which he effaces himself by the observance of all the impersonal rules—dietary, occupational, matrimonial, and devotional—appropriate to his collectivity. (P. 9).

The prescriptions of deference to the rules and categories of the established rank are the very prescriptions that established and now maintain the rank. Rank is thus performed on a social stage. All players rehearse their parts. In legal-rational cultures, too, there is a heavy burden to perform rule-deference because it is the legitimating basis for status differentiation. Linguistic performances of efficiency, fidelity to the rules, effectiveness, and professional competence are also required.

The subsystem language of management explicitly relies on symbols such as problem-solving logic, expert knowledge, and efficiency and effectiveness (Miller, Alkadry, and Donohue 2001). In management practice, potential action must be justified in terms of productivity—or it has not been justified. Those uninterested in the pursuit of efficiency, instrumental rationality, and hierarchical control are presumably uninterested in furthering management or management’s agenda. The performance must be spoken in the proper language, which is the language of managerialism.

Management literature resists deviating outside the parameters of that language game. In the contemporary management literature, this language expresses managerialism—or perhaps “new managerialism” or “reinventing government.” If contemporary attacks on managerial theory remain mostly unacknowledged (within managerialism), it is because this system, like all systems, tends to be insular and self-refer-

ential. The coherence of managerialism relies on its own phraseology that helps generate the proper atmospherics. Within the language of managerialism, all utterances must sympathize with the common vocabulary of managerial effectiveness. Inside the dialect, management is a real thing rather than a form of histrionics. Discourses that do not ritualize efficiency, managerial effectiveness, and hierarchy belong outside. There is no basis for registering certain kinds of complaints against managerialism except from outside it. The doubt that exists inside the system is expressed in silence.

Outside of managerialism, it is apparent that efficiency, like rationality, has mutated. It used to mean what it said it meant, until we began to doubt its inevitability and universality. Perhaps efficiency itself is a social construction, one that is peculiar to industrial societies. Efficiency, the legitimating rationale of modern managerial systems, can no longer execute the standardizing function that it has historically carried out. It is but a narrative, one that does more huffing and puffing than most. Efficiency is part of a language game, part of a narrative that has its own meaningful vocabulary. Rules of this grand narrative are endogenous to the narrative. The truth or falseness of its conceptualizations is not the point. One must get inside the subculture of management effectiveness and efficiency to believe the story. Outside it, efficiency and managerial effectiveness are folklore of a particular culture.

Organizational contrivance of a means-ends social life is central to the attempt to manipulate human beings into compliant patterns of behavior. The managerial narrative is the Geist that instructs the hackneyed clichés of bureaucratic systems trying to pretend they are not bureaucratic systems (e.g., *thinking outside of the box*, *vision*, *new public management*, *performance budgeting*, *results-oriented management* and *reinventing government*). The effectiveness of management systems in controlling much of anything has been called into question (MacIntyre 1984). Management systems always succeed, except for when they do not.

Efficiency thus becomes a simulation, another instance of rationality taken too far; another image of rationality that floats into hyperreality. Managerial techniques such as total quality management promise more than they deliver. ("They just didn't implement it right.") Rationality is in need of disaster relief, but instead, the disaster worsens.