Bureaucracy shouldn't be a dirty word: the role of people-responsive bureaucracy in a robust public economy

Janine R. Wedel [Schar School of Policy and Government, George Mason University, USA; and author, *Unaccountable: How the Establishment Corrupted Our Finances, Freedom and Politics and Created an Outside Class*]

Abstract
Bureaucracy, government, and practically all things "public" are under enormous siege in the age of Trump. This comes at an already perilous moment. Over the past several decades, government reform, privatization, checklist-type "accountability," and digitization, among other developments, have reorganized governance in a way that has weakened public institutions, apparently making them less responsive to the people they are supposed to serve. The status quo may well be connected to the collapse of public trust; wholesale disaffection is surely a key reason that voters have elected the likes of Trump and counterparts elsewhere. Now at the helm, Trump is further attacking the already weakened pillars of democratic society.

To help remedy this state of affairs, the "public" must come back as a virtue. Establishing a vibrant public economy relies on a well-functioning bureaucracy that truly serves people. We need to reconsider developments such as the outsourcing of government functions and the prevailing checklist approach to accountability. True accountability cannot be reduced to metrics that are poorly conceived, encourage appearances over truth, obscure the broader picture, and are severed from larger institutional knowledge and public trust.

A robust public economy is needed to help restore public trust. No democratic society can survive indefinitely without it.

Bureaucracy has been a dirty word for perhaps half a century. It conjures up government inefficiency and waste, and, yes, bureaucrats, those dull paper-pushers whose very beings supposedly resist entrepreneurial spirit and innovative ideas. Even the serious study of bureaucracy is passé. Try tracking down a college course or even graduate seminar on the subject; courses about organizations are many, those on bureaucracy, few and far between. Yet bureaucracy is a crucial component of any modern state, as well as any corporation.[63]

A public economy depends on bureaucracy that serves people. But over the past several decades, developments that include government "reform," contracting out, check-list type "accountability," and digitization have transformed bureaucracy as we once knew it. Over the same period, people have lost faith in public institutions. This article asks whether bureaucracy, in the form emergent in both the state and private spheres, disempowers regular people and hence has served to undermine public trust. Establishing a robust public economy requires understanding how bureaucracy has changed, how it now works in practice, and how these workings affect people and their trust in institutions. It requires acting to remedy any shortcomings to make bureaucracy more responsive.

[63] Max Weber, a seminal theorist on bureaucracy, dealt with bureaucracy in both government and private enterprise. For instance, he wrote: "The management of the modern office is based upon written documents ('the files'), which are preserved in their original or draft form. There is, therefore, a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts. The body of officials actively engaged in a 'public' office, along with the respective apparatus of material implements and the files, makes up a 'bureau.' In private enterprise, 'the bureau' is often called 'the office'" (Max Weber, "Bureaucracy," Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, p. 197).

Bureaucracy, democracy, and politicization

What is the role of bureaucracy in society? Bureaucracy, in some form or another, has long been part of virtually every formal institution and organization, let alone entities like states encompassing thousands of organizations. As anthropologist Michael R. Brown explains:[64]

> [O]nce human societies are aggregated in units of great complexity and geographic breadth, there is little evidence that people can live without some degree of bureaucratic control. It can be administered according to a system of patronage marked by nepotism and arbitrary decision making, or it can aspire to a technorational proceduralism justified by a discourse of fairness. The latter, of course, has come to prevail in democratic societies.

Attempts to create bureaucracy befitting democratic ideals can be traced to early modern Europe, which, as anthropologist Keith Hart details, "sought to devise public institutions whose benefits were guaranteed equally to all, regardless of who they were or whom they knew. These bureaucracies aimed at a new kind of universal democracy."[65]

It wasn't until the beginning of the 20th century that such depersonalized bureaucracy was thoroughly explicated: German sociologist Max Weber famously outlined a system of "rational-legal" authority – in contrast to "traditional" authority embedded in convention or "charismatic" authority emanating from the personal qualities of a leader. A-political and grounded in law and objective reason, rational-legal authority has the common good as its validation. Weber's bureaucracy is *legal* – it follows the rule of law; *rational* – the organization has goals that it attempts to realize; and *impersonal* – a client's ability to achieve a goal doesn't depend on his or her personal relationship with a bureaucrat. Impersonal principles and formal procedures govern.[66]

The esteemed sociologist was, of course, charting the *ideal* organization. Bureaucracy in the real world often falls short; a disjuncture looms between its prescribed principles and actual practices, as studies the world over show.[67] Moreover, if followed in letter and spirit, some scholars argue, bureaucracy would produce an organization with self-paralyzing routines.[68]

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64 Michael R. Brown, "A Tale of Three Buildings: Certifying Virtue in the New Moral Economy," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2010, p. 749.

65 Keith Hart, "Formal Bureaucracy and the Emergent Forms of the Informal Economy," *Research Paper No. 2005/11*, EGDI and UNU-WIDER 2005, p. 4. See also Ali Farazmand, "Bureaucracy and Democracy: A Theoretical Analysis," *Public Organization Review*, September 2010, Vol. 10, Issue 3, pp. 245-258.

66 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (Volumes 1-2), Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, eds., University of California Press, 1978. (See also Max Weber, Max Weber, "Bureaucracy," Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds., *From Max Weber.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1946; and Susan J. Hekman, "Weber's Ideal Type: A Contemporary Reassessment," *Polity*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1983, pp. 119–37.)

67 See, for example, Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors: Toward an Anthropology of Public Events,* New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1998; Michael Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State*, New York and London: Routledge, 2005; and Philip Parnell, "The Composite State," *Ethnography in Unstable Places: Everyday Lives in Contexts of Dramatic Political Change*, Carol J. Greenhouse, Elizabeth Mertz, and Kay B. Warren, eds. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002.

68 The existence of formal, impersonal structures does not imply a lack of personal networks or personalized relationships. As governance scholar Hugh Heclo wrote in 1977, "life at the top of the government bureaucracy is far different from the strict procedures, written orders, and rigid hierarchies generally associated with the term 'bureaucracy'" (Hugh Heclo, *A Government of Strangers: Executive Politics in Washington*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1977, p. 2).

The annals of democratic society (leaving completely aside, say, authoritarian or fascist regimes) are replete with examples – both big and small – of bureaucracy being bypassed, personalized, or influenced for political reasons.

First, there are perennial politics within and among bureaucracies over who gets what in a larger organizational universe, whether governmental or corporate. Bargaining among elite government actors, most especially government agencies whose representatives compete with each other for budgetary and personnel allocations, is the bread and butter of political scientists and public policy analysts who study "bureaucratic politics." Their works show that, instead of advancing public or national interests, officials often pursue policies that advantage their organizations (or units therein).

But what should be much more concerning to the future of democratic governance is what appears to be a trend over the past few decades, at least in the United States: government officials bypassing bureaucracy or undermining its impartiality by eschewing standard procedures. This activity appears to be on the rise. Consider these examples from different U.S. administrations of different political stripes.

In the Iran-Contra affair of the 1980s under President Ronald Reagan, rogue officials created alternative governance structures and processes to circumvent standard bureaucracy, as well as the checks and balances of Congress, which had outlawed their activity. Simultaneously they also enjoyed the tacit approval of President Reagan, who had secretly blessed the operations. These structures and processes, although substantially embedded within governmental bodies and often carried out by officials, were off the books: They skirted bureaucratic and chain-of-command structures and enabled the players to carry out illegal operations in secret, thereby derailing official U.S. foreign policy.[69]

A decade later major decisions that would greatly adversely affect the world economy also eschewed formal procedure in favor of informality. During the late 1990s Clinton administration, members of a long-standing informal power clique around Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin excluded officials from decision making who would be included if official position, rather than membership in the clique, were their guiding principle. At the same time, they brought in others from outside government who were part of their network: clique members who were top bankers, the very people whose activities were supposedly being regulated. With key members in U.S. finance posts and others on Wall Street, the Rubin clique excluded from participation in decision making Brooksley Born, chair of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission. One might expect that a CFTC chair could exercise some formal power. But Born stood well outside the Rubin clique, whose members sought to avoid regulation of an exotic derivative that she thought was dangerous.[70] The clique prevailed.[71] Its advocacy of unregulated derivatives and the 1999 repeal of the Glass-Steagall Act bear

[69] See analysis and sources in Janine R. Wedel, *Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009, pp. 161-165.
[70] E.g., Manuel Roig-Franzia, "Brooksley Born, the Cassandra of the Derivatives Crisis," *Washington Post*, May 26, 2009, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/25/AR2009052502108.html.
[71] See analysis and sources in Janine R. Wedel, *Unaccountable: How the Establishment Corrupted Our Finances, Freedom and Politics and Created an Outsider Class*. New York, NY: Pegasus Books, pp. 18-19 and 64-68.

significant responsibility for the 2008 financial crisis.[72] Born soon left public service while clique members continued to amass roles of influence that included lucrative stints at banks and hedge funds.

In the subsequent George W. Bush administration of the early 2000s, yet another episode of bureaucratic and procedural circumvention unfolded at the behest of the dozen or so members of the "Neocon Core" and their allies who helped take the United States to war in Iraq. They did so substantially by thwarting bureaucratic and professional authority, creating within government personalized practices and network-based structures while circumventing standard ones and marginalizing officials who were not part of their network. Neocon Core members in government duplicated job descriptions of existing government units, setting up their own units manned largely with loyalist allies and creating intelligence (supposedly) showing, for example, that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. They operated through a cross-agency clique; in fact, the U.S. decision to go to war in Iraq was made outside the usual interagency processes, according to a host of insiders in key agencies, including the Pentagon and the Department of State.[73]

These cases of bureaucracy-busting policy making seem to be part of a general trend of sidelining, personalizing, and informalizing bureaucracy. The increasing exposure of civil servants to politicization and the filling of positions with political appointees previously held by civil servants are part of the trend. The rules that had governed civil servants for the better part of a century came under attack at the beginning of the 21th century. After 9/11, for instance, President George W. Bush relaxed the application of long-standing civil service rules in the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security on a limited basis and slated other departments to follow suit.[74] The work of civil servants may have become more open to network- and politics-influenced decision making. According to Paul Light, who studies the presidential appointment process, a "thickening" occurred under the Bush administration in which political appointees filled more management layers in government. One related practice

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[72] See, for instance, Gretchen Morgenson, "3,000 Pages of Financial Reform, but Still Not Enough," *New York Times*, May 29, 2010, http://www.nytimes.com.mutex.gmu.edu/2010/05/30/business/30gret.html.

[73] See analysis and sources in Janine R. Wedel, *Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009, pp. 169-187.

[74] The Bush administration proposed new pay and personnel rules pertaining to how employees are compensated, hired, promoted, and disciplined for the 850,000 civil servants in the departments of Defense and Homeland Security, which account for almost half of the federal workforce (Stephen Barr, "It Could Be Auld Lang Syne For Annual Pay Raises," *Washington Post*, January 1, 2006, p. C02, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/12/31/AR2005123100867_pf.html). Unions in both departments contested aspects of the new rules (Stephen Barr and Christopher Lee, "Director of Civil Service Resigns: James Oversaw Key Rule Changes," *Washington Post*, January 11, 2005, p. A13, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A63283-2005 Jan10.html). In the end, these rules were put into effect on a limited basis only: for a fraction of the DOD workforce and for a short time for the DHS workforce (author's conversation with John Threlkeld, AFGE Legislative Representative, American Federation of Government Employees, March 19, 2008).

The Bush Administration proposed to extend the Defense and Homeland Security pay-for-performance systems to a much larger portion of federal employees through the "Working for America Act," which was to do away with the General Schedule by 2010 (Stephen Barr, "Labor Keeps Its Guard Up Against Efforts to Change Workplace Rules," *Washington Post*, November 8, 2005, p. B02, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/11/07/AR2005110701401.html, and Karen Rutzkik, "Administration Continues Quest to Tie Pay to Performance Across Government," *Government Executive*, July 19, 2005, http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0705/071905r1.htm). In 2006 the General Schedule applied to some 1.8 million federal employees (Barr, "It Could Be Auld Lang Syne"). However, some of the pay-for performance standards for Defense and Homeland Security were struck down in U.S. District Court. (See http://www.govexec.com/dailyfed/0805/081705r1.htm.)

for federal employees, says Light, was "very tight coordination from the White House on down to the political appointees."[75]

President Donald Trump, of course, has exploded the politicization of bureaucracy through all-out attacks on government, bureaucracy, and the civil service. He has appointed cabinet members who have been openly hostile to the agencies they have been tapped to run. Their loyalty appears to flow more to the industries from whence they come (and to Trump) than to the missions of their agencies and their roles as public servant. Trump attempted to reorganize the National Security Council to include, for the first time, a political strategist, until that strategist, Stephen Bannon, was ousted four months later.[76] Perhaps most important is what Trump has *not* done, namely, fill hundreds of important, vacant roles.[77] The State Department in particular has been the scene of massive layoffs and brain drain.[78] All this, of course, serves to expand executive power, which helps to further concentrate information, resources, and decision making.

Government, redesigned

Some of these trends have been influenced, exacerbated, or even powered by the raft of governments reforms that began in the 1980s.

The vision of a streamlined state burst onto the public stage in the United States and the United Kingdom in the early 1980s, with Ronald Reagan and his ideological soul mate, Margaret Thatcher, leading the rhetorical charge. Streamlining the state is part of a grab bag of ideas and policies often referred to as "neoliberalism," a term I employ sparingly because it can describe considerably different policies, with even more diverse local adaptations to them.[79]

While classical liberal philosophy (harking back to the Enlightenment) sought to safeguard individual rights from state power, protect private property, and enshrine *laissez-faire* economics, neoliberal policies of the past nearly four decades emphasize modest-size

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[75] Light is quoted in Stephen Barr, "Appointees Everywhere, But Try to Count Them," *Washington Post*, Sunday, October 17, 2004, p. C2, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A38874-2004Oct16.html.

[76] See, for example, Kelly Magsamen, "What Trump's Reshuffling of the National Security Council Means," *The Atlantic*, January 30, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/01/the-trump-national-security-council-an-analysis/514910/.

[77] See, for instance, Brian Naylor, "Trump Administration Has More than 250 Unfilled Jobs," *All Things Considered*, NPR, November 22, 2017, https://www.npr.org/2017/11/22/566098660/trump-administration-has-more-than-250-unfilled-jobs.

[78] Gardiner Harris, "Diplomats Sound the Alarm as They are Pushed Out in Droves," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/24/us/politics/state-department-tillerson.html.

[79] Geographer Wendy Larner notes that "neoliberalism" is used to describe vastly different political projects across the global North and South – from welfare state restructuring to structural adjustment programs. Lerner observes that "neoliberalism doesn't necessarily travel in the directions we assume, take on the forms we expect, or have the consequences we expect." She clarifies that, while neoliberalism should not be confused with "neoconservatism" (a movement that began in the United States roughly five decades ago), neoliberal and neoconservative concepts are sometimes intertwined. See Wendy Larner, "Situating Neoliberalism: Geographics of a Contested Concept," presented at the workshop on "Transnational Governmentality in South East Europe: Translating Neo-Liberalism on the Sovereign Frontier," Rabac, Croatia, cosponsored by the Institute of Economics, Zagreb, Croatia, and the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, June 1, 2007. See also Waughan Higgins and Wendy Larner, "Introduction," Waughan Higgins and Wendy Larner, eds., *Assembling Neoliberalism: Experts, Practices, Subjects,* New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017.

government, minimal restrictions on business, and "free" markets. Thus Reagan campaigned against "big government" and presided over an age of deregulation, relaxing constraints on industry, while Thatcher pressed to privatize the economy by selling government-owned enterprises. The redesign of government had its origins in these policy reforms (especially those dealing with government itself), as well as in expanded executive power, which often was necessary to implement neoliberal reform.

There can be good reason for the redesign of government. When unbending bureaucracies prove exasperating, there are calls in democratic society for flexibility to make them more user friendly. David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, authors of the influential *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit Is Transforming the Public Sector*, published in 1992, criticized governments for their "sluggish, centralized bureaucracies, their preoccupations with rules and regulations, and their hierarchical chains of command."[80] These ideas resonated; *Reinventing Government* became a best seller, despite its dry case studies that largely treat state and local governments. The authors gave new voice to a prevalent critique of government that had been expressed before in various incarnations and that would hasten the redesign of government. With their roots in the Anglo-Saxon world, neoliberal ideas and policies would travel the globe in varying constellations.

Modeling government after business: Efforts to limit the size of government, replete with attempts to make government more like business and to enlist private actors in its work, implicitly challenged the model of bureaucracy elucidated by Weber – one with clear distinctions between the state and private sectors and regulated through professional administration, that is, formal, impersonal structures rather than personalistic ones. Neoliberal policies, first implemented in Anglo-Saxon contexts that comported more to Weber's model (with all models, of course, encountering challenges when they butt up against reality), were hardly friendly to it. Neoliberalism helped occasion a breakdown of the distinction between state and private, bureaucracy and market.

A brief sketch of the trajectory of neoliberal reform sheds light on this breakdown – as the wellspring of today's redesign of government – and its results. The "Reagan revolution" sanctified the practice of contracting out government services, ostensibly to control costs while letting governing entities concentrate on their central mission. (The United States was already a pioneer in contracting out, with the Manhattan Project of World War II and Project RAND, established in 1946, among the templates.) As well, enlisting nongovernmental actors and forging collaborative relations with private entities (as in public-private partnerships) would make government more responsive and efficient. Again, the United States, with its history of private bodies building railroads, universities, and civic institutions, took the lead.[81]

Business was the model for government. In 1976, Ronald Reagan, while running for president, foresaw the ideal state as one in which "modern business practices could make

[80] David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*, Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1992, pp. 11–12.
[81] With regard to the goals of contracting out, see Dan Guttman, "Contracting, an American Way of Governance: Post 9/11 Constitutional Choices," Thomas H. Stanton, ed., *Meeting the Challenge of 9/11: Blueprints for More Effective Government*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe Publishers, 2006, p. 230. With regard to the participation of nongovernmental actors in governance, see, for example, Lester M. Salamon, *The New Governance: Getting Beyond the Right Answer to the Wrong Question in Public Sector Reform,* School of Policy Studies, Queen's University: The J. Douglas Gibson Lecture, delivered February 3, 2005, p. 5.

government more efficient, economical, and responsive."[82] The New Public Management, which gained currency in the 1980s, sought to apply business principles such as competition and an emphasis on outcomes to government. Heading up President Clinton's "reinventing government" initiative in the 1990s, Vice President Al Gore echoed the point: "We need to adopt the very best management techniques from the private sector to create governments that are fully prepared for the Information Age."[83] An example is his promised civil service reform, "based on an insight that is common in private industry: you pay for performance." (Of course, that maxim has not been applied equally. Many CEOs are not paid for performance but paid *whatever* their performance.) The injection of business principles into government was reflected in the language: Recipients of state services become "customers" and citizens "shareholders," while hierarchy gives way to "participation" and "teamwork," and rule-driven to "mission-driven" government.[84]

However reasonable these reforms may sound, the fact is that making government more like business constituted a full-frontal challenge (without necessarily declaring it), to the qualities of government and business, in which government operated for the public good and was accountable to the public, and business, ostensibly based on competition, made money. Imbuing government with the character of business could not help but unsettle the accountability frameworks that depended on the clear demarcations that had evolved within many modern democratic states. Graham Scott, the treasury secretary of New Zealand who implemented sweeping "performance-based management" reforms there beginning in the 1980s and an astute student of government reform, was emphatic on this point. "The complexity and networks [brought about by the management reforms] create the demands for old-fashioned accountability... More than ever, we must be vigilant," he told me.[85]

Whatever the benefits of these reforms, they introduced challenges of accountability – that of the state to its citizenry. Just one challenge was that of the complexity injected into governance via the increase in entities and actors involved and not subject to the same rules as government employees.

Another series of accountability challenges arose with several pervasive long-standing narratives that work to mask ground-level realities of neoliberal reform. In the United States, for instance, the practice of railing against "big government" appears to have led to the creation of still bigger government – and of a less accountable sort. That is because, while federal government was officially being contained in size – as measured in terms of civil servants and others employed directly by government – "shadow government" was getting ever bigger. The 1976 book *The Shadow Government,* published five years before Reagan took office, details the vast off-the-books government workforce already entrenched. Since then, shadow government has done nothing but grow. Its ranks include all manner of consultants, companies, and NGOs, not to mention entire bastions of outsourcing – neighborhoods whose high-rises house an army of contractors and "Beltway Bandits."

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[82] Ronald Reagan, "To Restore America," March 31, 1976, http://reagan2020.us/speeches/To_Restore_America.asp, accessed June 24, 2006.
[83] Al Gore, "Remarks by Vice President Al Gore, Opening Session of International REGO Conference," International Reinventing Government Conference, January 14, 1999, http://clinton2.nara.gov/WH/EOP/OVP/speeches/interego.html, accessed April 14, 2007.
[84] The ideas about injecting business principles into government are set out in David Osborne and Ted Gaebler, *Reinventing Government: How the Entrepreneurial Spirit is Transforming the Public Sector*, Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1992. Berating bureaucracy is a crucial component here. David Osborne even wrote a book (with Peter Plastrik) titled *Banishing Bureaucracy: The Five Strategies for Reinventing Government*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1997.
[85] Author's interview with Graham Scott, December 10, 2006.

Consulting firms and quasi-official bodies (such as government advisory boards) daily stand in for government. In 2015 Paul Light, who studies the size of the federal workforce, found a ratio of 1.81 federal contract workers to 1 federal employee, or almost two contract workers for each government employee (based on an estimated 3,702,000 contract workers to 2,042,000 government employees).[86] Largely out of sight except to Washington-area dwellers, contractors and the companies they work for seldom appear in government directories. Rarely are they dragged before congressional committees for hostile questioning. They function with less visibility and scrutiny than government employees would face. Most important, they are not counted as government employees, and so the fiction of limited government can be upheld, while the reality is that of an expanding sprawl of entities that are the government in practice.[87]

Alongside the narrative of limited government is the idea that government remains in control and accountable even when transferring its functions and legitimacy to the private sector. Officially, only government officials carry out "inherently governmental" functions – the government's term for work that only federal employees should do; they also monitor the contracting process and ensure the quality of work performed by contractors. Yet investigations of on-the-ground operations indicate otherwise. Contractors today run intelligence operations, choose and oversee other contractors, and draft official documents, often with little or no oversight from actual government employees.[88] In such arrangements, new forms of governance are created. Yet the facade of a government in control and accountable prevails.

Neutrality is another narrative that accompanies neoliberal-inspired changes nearly everywhere they are implemented. Deregulation and the privatization of state-owned enterprises and services, which became standard international development fare in the 1980s, are presented as technical projects, designed to achieve greater efficiency. The public face of these policies – the legions of fly-in, fly-out economists, accountants, and planners – reinforce that narrative. Clad in the personality and language of efficiency, neoliberal

[86] Light, Paul C., "The Government Industrial Complex, 1984-2015," online draft book chapter, 2016, http://media.npr.org/assets/news/2016/11/light.pdf.
[87] Daniel Guttman and Barry Willner, *The Shadow Government: The Government's Multi-Billion-Dollar Giveaway of Its Decision-Making Powers to Private Management Consultants, "Experts," and Think Tanks*, New York, NY: Pantheon, 1976.
[88] For evidence regarding the outsourcing of inherently governmental functions and dearth of oversight from actual government officials, see Paul R. Verkuil, *Outsourcing Sovereignty: Why Privatization of Government Functions Threatens Democracy and What We Can Do About It.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007; Janine R. Wedel, *Shadow Elite: How the World's New Power Brokers Undermine Democracy, Government, and the Free Market*, New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009, pp. 161-165; and Janine R. Wedel, "*Federalist* No. 70: Where Does the Public Service Begin and End?" *Public Administration Review,* December 2011, p. S118-S127. Regarding contractors conducting inherently government in military and intelligence arenas, see, for instance, https://www.govexec.com/oversight/2011/01/gao-army-contractors-performing-inherently-governmental-functions/33120/; https://www.nytimes.com/2008/06/15/business/15shelf.html; and https://cybercemetery.unt.edu/archive/cwc/20110929215927/http://www.wartimecontracting.gov/docs/hearing2010-06-18_transcript.pdf.

Legal scholar and governance expert Dan Guttman wrote 30 years after coauthoring *The Shadow Government*: "The evidence that the official workforce can no longer be presumed to have capacity to account has long gone well beyond anecdote; red flags counseling due diligence are omnipresent; they include high level official admissions of systematic deficiency, years of Government Accountability Office findings of agency-wide deficiencies, and continuing failures of third party oversight in sensitive and showcased programs." Dan Guttman, "Contracting, an American Way of Governance: Post 9/11 Constitutional Choices," Thomas H. Stanton, ed., *Meeting the Challenge of 9/11: Blueprints for More Effective Government*, Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe Publishers, 2006, p. 231.

principles, spun off in various forms, have circled the globe, with the international financial institutions as frequent sponsors and sometimes local economists trained in elite American schools playing leading roles, such as ministers of finance or the economy.

Yet where neoliberal policies took hold outside the Anglo-Saxon world – and they did not always do so – the charade of neutrality is often unmasked. Privatization and deregulation are, at their core, ideological, value-laden endeavors that stimulated reorganizing, and often came on the heels of unpopular macroeconomic restructuring at the behest of the international financial institutions. Whatever their economic rationale and results, and however democracy-challenged the countries into which the policies were introduced already were, these policies did not tend to mesh well with the encouragement of checks and balances, state-private demarcation, or democratic participation. Moreover, implementing privatization and deregulation often required an expanding executive – backed, of course, by the power of the relevant international financial institutions – that crowded out checks and balances offered by legislatures and courts. Thus, privatization and deregulation restructured governance and power and were hardly neutral.[89]

Further challenging these three neoliberal narratives is another staple of the neoliberal policy sweep – the establishment of nongovernmental bodies that carry out government functions. Such bodies have the potential to create the ultimate flex-friendly environment, in which nimble opportunists flex boundaries to pursue self-interested agendas with impunity. Initiated by international development agencies, these hybrid entities – variously called “quasi-government organizations,” “para-governmental organizations,” “parastatals,” and state-created “NGOs” (all with somewhat different meanings) – might recall the quasi-nongovernmental organizations of the United States and the UK (sometimes called “quangos”) that are outside the civil service but funded by the state. But there are differences. Supposedly set up to bypass bureaucratized government, these bodies are sometimes endowed with more authority than the relevant government agencies and enable private players to create and carry out government functions. Whatever efficiency might come from such arrangements, they inspire flex activity because the players who empower them can avail themselves of the best of both worlds – the authority and ability to allocate resources of the state, combined with the profits of the private sector – while weaseling out of both accountability to the state and private sector competition. Such arrangements put the lie to the neoliberal narratives and lend themselves to governance via fusions of state and private power or simply to its privatization.[90]

The collapse of communism on the heels of this wide deployment of neoliberal ideas suddenly presented a vast new expanse for the employment of neoliberal narratives and policies in the 1990s. Not surprisingly, many a privatization adviser sent by an international development institution or Big Six accounting firm hailed from the United States or the United

[89] The neoliberal ethos holds that handing government functions to nongovernmental entities merely improves management (or, in the case of NGOs delivering services, responsiveness and citizens’ participation). On NGOs and citizens’ participation, see, for instance, Jennifer R. Wolch’s *The Shadow State: Government and Voluntary Sector in Transition*, New York, NY: The Foundation Center, 1990, in which she argues that state-sponsored voluntary organizations comprise a “shadow state.”

[90] The concept of “quasi-nongovernmental organization” was coined by Alan Pifer in 1967. Alan Pifer, “Letter: On Quasi-Public Organizations; Whence Came the Quango, and Why,” *New York Times,* September 5, 1987, http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B0DE2D61030F936A3575AC0A961948260.

Ian Thynne and Roger Wettenhall investigate the nature and diversity of privatization activities and observe a range of state-private mixes. See, for instance, Roger Wettenhall and Ian Thynne, *The Asia Pacific Journal of Public Administration* 27, No. 2, December 2005, pp. 111–116.

Kingdom and pushed many of the same reforms as elsewhere, this time into overbureaucratized, inflexible command systems that had lost their command. Rather than helping construct effective state apparatuses, the state was often berated and bureaucracy bypassed by creating quasi-governmental entities to go around government while doing its work.[91] As the movement advanced with little resistance, privatization exploded around the globe; by 1998, its rate was practically doubling every year.[92] There was power in positive thinking. As political scientists Harvey Feigenbaum and Jeffrey Henig assessed it in 1997, "if economic policy could lay claim to popularity, at least among the world's elites, it would certainly be privatization."[93] This "privatization revolution" encouraged the melding of state and private power.[94]

Here again, while the narratives of neoliberalism were at work, including that of neutrality, institutions and policymaking processes were established that distanced citizens from the democratic input and the checks and balances for which they had been clamoring. Whatever their merits, neoliberal policies could not help but facilitate the blurring of state and private relationships and authority. When walls separating functions and ensuring balance of power are weak, those functions and power balances are able to be concentrated – enabling intensified influence.

This does not mean, of course, that government bureaucracy has been put out of commission. Rather, forces have been afoot to reinvent it, to make it more informal, improvised, and more dependent on personalistic networks. As a result, by the turn of the last century, bureaucracy had become "multilayered and more diffuse," as political scientist Jan Aart Scholte described it. [95] Of course, all this eases the fusion of state and private power and provides a hospitable habitat for the flouting of democratic practice.

What is the impact of the redesign of government on democratic governance? Political scientists Laura S. Jensen and Sheila S. Kennedy, among other analysts, have taken issue with the widely held view that "the command and control of the sovereign, once the hallmark of democratic government, has become outmoded, and is being replaced by a new management paradigm."[96] This paradigm remakes bureaucracy away from democratic principles and process.

Making government "accountable": If government was to be modeled after business and conducted substantially by nongovernmental entities, a way was needed of assessing performance from the outside and ensuring accountability. Thus was born the audit and a series of evaluation and management practices around it that have evolved to encompass checklist assessments, ratings and ranking schemes, metrics, and performance indices.

[91] For documentation and details regarding Western-underwritten privatization in central and eastern Europe, see Janine R. Wedel, *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe*, New York, NY: Palgrave, 2001, especially chapters 2 and 4.
[92] Data on the privatization explosion and its rate of increase in the 1990s are from Martin Van Creveld, *The Rise and Decline of the State*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 375–377; and Adrian T. Moore, ed. *Privatization 98: 12th Annual Report on Privatization*, Los Angeles, CA: Reason Public Policy Institute, 1998.
[93] Harvey Feigenbaum and Jeffrey Henig, "Privatization and Political Theory," *Journal of International Affairs*, No. 50, Winter 1997, p. 338.
[94] The term "privatization revolution" is from P. W. Singer's *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003, especially pp. 66–68.
[95] Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000, p. 5.
[96] Laura S. Jensen and Sheila S. Kennedy, "Public Ethics, Legal Accountability, and the New Governance," *Ethics in Public Management,* H. George Frederickson and Richard K. Ghere, eds., Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2005.

Assessing public service performance through audits took off in the 1980s, with Anglo-Saxon countries that adopted the New Public Management – the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand – leaders in the endeavor. The goal of refashioning the state in the image of the private sector motivated the migration of audits from their original association with financial management to other areas of professional life. The idea of audits exploded throughout society and permeated organizational life as the chief method of controlling individuals, as Michael Power,[97] an experienced chartered accountant and accounting professor, has written. Thus, by the early part of this century, "school and university rankings, ratings and league tables of municipalities and hospitals [had] become part of many people's lives in the developed countries," observe political scientists Christopher Hood, Ruth Dixon, and Craig Beeston. "If government itself does not provide such rankings," they add, "news media, think-tanks, commercial firms, public-interest groups or (in a few cases) academics do."[98]

The 1980s innovations were not without precedent. The ratings and rankings of public services have a long history in the United States, the United Kingdom, and beyond. The endeavor stretches at least as far back as Jeremy Bentham's late 18^{th} century prescription for judging public service-providing organizations through his principles of "tabular-statement" and "comparison and selection." The British East Indian Company developed a vast system to assess competency on the part of its officials.[99] And as early as the 1840s in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, reformers looked to evaluate elementary school performance by comparing the results of uniform test scores across schools.[100]

More than a century later, in the 1960s, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara brought management practices from General Motors, where he had been CEO, to the Pentagon. To gauge progress in the war in Indochina, indices were constructed from counts of supposed enemy dead and Vietnamese hamlets pacified. An internal Central Intelligence Agency document later called the exercise "the greatest snow job since Potemkin built his village."[101]

Potemkin-style illusions are not limited to this episode of American foreign policy. A brief look at the recent history of audit and evaluation practices shows how inadequate they are when employed as a sole means of evaluating what an organization produces, the effects of its policies, or what goes on inside it. These practices disconnect the organization and those within it from loyalty to and trust of the organization and sever it from its original spirit. For, as auditor-turned-professor Power makes plain, "audit" is an idea, not just a set of technical practices: "Audit is not passive but actively shapes the activities it is intended to control," he observes. The proliferation of audits parallels a "fundamental shift in patterns of governance in advanced industrial societies."[102]

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[97] Michael Power, *The Audit Explosion*, London, UK: Demos, 1994; Michael Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997.
[98] Christopher Hood, Ruth Dixon, and Craig Beeston, "Rating the Rankings: Assessing International Rankings of Public Service Performance," *International Public Management Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2008, pp. 299-300.
[99] Christopher Hood, Ruth Dixon, and Craig Beeston, "Rating the Rankings: Assessing International Rankings of Public Service Performance," *International Public Management Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2008, p. 299.
[100] William T. Gormley, Jr. and David L. Weimer, *Organizational Report Cards,* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 39-40.
[101] Charles Mohr, "McNamara on Record, Reluctantly, on Vietnam," *New York Times,* May 16, 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/05/16/us/mcnamara-on-record-reluctantly-on-vietnam.html, p. A00024.
[102] Michael Power, *The Audit Explosion*, London, UK: Demos, 1994, p. 7, 4.

Auditing, which derives from accountancy, breaks things down into observable, isolated, and often quantifiable pieces and then scrutinizes the pieces – frequently with little or no regard for the whole, as Power explains.[103] When information is broken up into bits so that essential pieces are separated from each other, knowledge, wisdom, and institutional memory are sidelined. This type of accountability is substantially removed from the internal ethics of a community to which it is supposed to apply. Accountability is imposed from the outside – without the engagement of a "moral community" – a community "that shapes (and is shaped by) the expectations, rules, norms and values of social relationships," as political scientist Melvin Dubnick defines it. A moral community approach lies at the heart of governance "in contexts where there is a sense of agreement about the legitimacy of expectations among community members," as Dubnick has expressed.[104]

Yet when the legitimacy of an organization and those within are sidelined, along with their professional ethics, we are left with an emphasis on auditable outcomes and the demand, above all, to *show* that an organization's mission is being accomplished. Simple story lines, metrics, and single indicators must be contrived to convince an audience far from the context in which the mission is being carried out. Accountability gets reduced to tick-boxes and metrics that encourage "performing" for the auditor/evaluator, congressional committee, sponsor, and public. The performance is all about the *appearance* of doing a good job, as John Clarke, a cultural analyst of bureaucracy, has observed.[105] With appearing to accomplish the mission rewarded at the expense of actually accomplishing it, true accountability is made more difficult to achieve. In fact, a fundamental contradiction underlies the checklist approach to accountability, as anthropologist Marilyn Strathern points out. While people aim to make their trust visible through the display of information, the very wish to do so signals the absence of trust.[106]

The detached bureaucrat, the digital era, and the public trust deficit

These efforts to redesign government have occurred along with the dawn of the digitization era. Taken together, how has this changed the public's perception and experience of government? What happens when an individual, seeking information or a service from the government, encounters the digital state?

A growing body of research studies how interactions of the digital age (together with checklist-type "accountability" systems and outsourcing, among other developments) have disconnected the official/bureaucrat from the client in ways never before possible. In Weberian bureaucracy, the obligation was to the client. Of course, an individual bureaucrat could be incompetent, lazy, or corrupt and not at all responsive. Still, he was supposed to

[103] This practice is patterned after the audit's first major application after finance: industry, in which the audit applied rigid rules to the quality control and counting of mechanical items, such as nuts and bolts in a factory. Well-defined jobs had a clear list of tasks for which one employee was responsible. Employees performed discrete tasks and were not expected to know how the pieces fit together. Michael Power, *The Audit Explosion*, London, UK: Demos, 1994. See also Michael Power, *The Audit Society: Rituals of Verification*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1997.
[104] Melvin J. Dubnick, *Seeking salvation for accountability*. Presented at Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Boston, August 29–Sept. 1, 2002, http://mjdubnick.dubnick.net/papersrw/2002/salv2002.pdf, pp. 6-7.
[105] John Clarke, "Performing for the Public: Doubt, Desire and the Evaluation of Public Services," *The Values of Bureaucracy,* Paul Du Gay, ed., Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005.
[106] Marilyn Strathern, "The Tyranny of Transparency," *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 26, 2000, pp. 309-321.

respond to the client's needs. But nowadays, bureaucracy is organized into silos and information universes with bits and bytes separated from each other, treading in a sea of digital routines. Employees working in such silos are incentivized to have a stake only in their own cubicles and are evaluated by how well they perform on the silo-specific checklist. These risks are even higher when government is fragmented through outsourcing and subcontracting.[107]

Studies of corporate organizations show how "structured unaccountability" is built into this form of bureaucracy. Functionaries in such complex organizations, be they traders in complicated financial instruments or employees or contractors working in customer service, have incentives to care only about their own silo, not about the larger outcome for the client, let alone the public. The term "structured unaccountability" was coined by a team of sociologists to capture this very disconnect. After the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the iconic Wall Street firm that fell in the autumn of 2008, signaling the global financial crisis, the sociologists interviewed dozens of Swiss, German, and Austrian bankers (managers and employees from different departments and at different levels), who described how the industry had changed. It used to be that bankers were responsible for a borrower's ability to pay back a loan. There came a point in the early part of this century, though, when they were no longer responsible for the results of their lending, only for doing deals – as many as possible.[108] Bonuses were generally granted according to the volume of deals made, not necessarily the consequences of any given deal. True accountability was structured out of the equation.[109]

Little comparable work has as yet been done on government bureaucracy. But an emergent literature in anthropology that examines how people meet and experience the state in the age of digitization and checklist accountability finds that users' experience may not be positive.[110] As an anthropologist studying social welfare in Norway puts it, "the notion, propagated by both the Norwegian government and intergovernmental organizations like the OECD, that digitizing the user's experience of the welfare state will bring only benefits very much

[107] Janine R. Wedel, *Unaccountable: How the Establishment Corrupted Our Finances, Freedom and Politics and Created an Outsider Class*. New York, NY: Pegasus Books, pp. 30-47.
[108] Some of these bankers would not entertain any responsibility for enabling the crisis, saying they knew only their own piece (read: silo) of the operation. Structured unaccountability, sociologists Honegger, Neckel, and Magnin concluded, not only abetted the crisis, but also relieved the bankers of culpability. (Claudia Honegger, Sighard Neckel, and Chantal Magnin. *Strukturierte Verantwortungslosigkeit: Berichte aus der Bankenwelt*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH und Co. KG, 2010.)
[109] Claudia Honegger, Sighard Neckel, and Chantal Magnin. *Strukturierte Verantwortungslosigkeit: Berichte aus der Bankenwelt*. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag GmbH und Co. KG, 2010, pp. 306-307.
[110] See, for instance, Kelly McKowen, "Face-To-Interface: Social Welfare and the Digital State in Contemporary Norway," Panel on "Screen-level Bureaucracy: Organizational Encounters in the Digitized and Automated World," Presented at the Annual Anthropology Meeting, December 2, 2017; Julia Rahbaek Moller, "Digitizing Social Work in Denmark," Panel on "Screen-level Bureaucracy: Organizational Encounters in the Digitized and Automated World," Presented at the Annual Anthropology Meeting, December 2, 2017; Matthew Hull, "Oral Self-Presentation in a Law of Writing: Software Records and Written Statement in Police Procedure, Panel on "Screen-level Bureaucracy: Organizational Encounters in the Digitized and Automated World," Presented at the Annual Anthropology Meeting, December 2, 2017; and Elizabeth Youngling, "It's not an exact science": Regulation, Automation and Risk in the Mortgage Lending Industry," Panel on "Screen-level Bureaucracy: Organizational Encounters in the Digitized and Automated World," Presented at the Annual Anthropology Meeting, December 2, 2017;
https://www.eventscribe.net/2017/aaa/fsPopup.asp?Mode=sessioninfo&PresentationID=309312.

overlooks various effects of the previous physical or digitally-supported experience that resist measurement or quantification…[T]hey are no less important."[111]

Might today's form of bureaucracy help undermine trust in public institutions? Is there a connection between government bureaucracy's responsiveness to the public and trust in the institutions of government? Public trust in institutions has plummeted: Worldwide, public opinion polls over recent decades show a striking loss of public trust in institutions – from courts and parliaments to banks and corporations to the media. Is this fall related to these institutions' diminished ability to satisfy public needs?

In 2018 a full two-thirds of the countries measured by the firm Edelman were deemed "distruster," with less than half of their people trusting in mainstream institutions. A year earlier, Edelman called the situation worldwide an "implosion of trust."[112]

Many societies have traditionally had little faith in their countries' formal institutions. A case in point is societies schooled in communism (during certain periods). As I learned through on-the-ground study as a social anthropologist in 1980s communist Poland, such societies become accustomed to not trusting in formal institutions (and find ingenious workarounds to sidestep them to the extent possible). But that was not the case in the United States or Western democracies more generally, where many people genuinely believed in civic institutions 30-40 years ago.[113] Today, by contrast, trust is in freefall, as measured by Edelman and other public opinion polls. The U.S. picture is notably dire, especially among the "informed public."[114] According to Edelman,

> The collapse of trust in the U.S. is driven by a staggering lack of faith in government, which fell 14 points to 33 percent among the general population, and 30 points to 33 percent among the informed public. The remaining institutions of business, media and NGOs also experienced declines of 10 to 20 points.[115]

And indeed, as posited by Edelman and other public opinion polls, the crisis in trust stretches far beyond government institutions. Whether it's a bank, insurance company, clinic, public school, news source, union, or even place of worship, all have posted staggering declines in confidence. Confidence in civic institutions has been on the wane in the United States since the 1970s, according to Gallup. Its most recent Confidence in Institutions survey shows that

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[111] See, for instance, Kelly McKowen, "Face-To-Interface: Social Welfare and the Digital State in Contemporary Norway," Panel on "Screen-level Bureaucracy: Organizational Encounters in the Digitized and Automated World," Presented at the Annual Anthropology Meeting, December 2, 2017, p. 7.

[112] "Confidence in Institutions," *Gallup*, 2017, http://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx

[113] A poll published in 2007 on declining trust globally and corruption shows that, over the last four decades, nearly all of the so-called developed, industrialized democracies have been experiencing a decrease in public trust in government. This has not occurred at the same pace or necessarily for the same reasons everywhere, but the trend is pervasive. (Peri K. Blind, "Building Trust In Government In The Twenty-First Century: Review of Literature and Emerging Issues." 7th Global Forum on Reinventing Government: Building Trust in Government 26-29 June 2007, Vienna, Austria, November 2006, http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan025062.pdf, pp. 8-23.)

[114] 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, https://www.edelman.com/trust-barometer.

[115] 2018 Edelman Trust Barometer, "2018 Trust Barometer Reveals Record-Breaking Drop in Trust in the United States," https://www.edelman.com/news-awards/2018-edelman-trust-barometer-reveals-record-breaking-drop-trust-in-the-us.

trust has decreased by double-digit percentages since the 1970s for 12 out of 17 institutions, including the signature ones of the presidency, Congress, banks, and the press.[116]

A majority of these institutions themselves, I would observe, are fundamentally different than they were at the time public trust was first measured. A bank of today is not the bank of the 1970s, when you could get a mortgage by talking to the local lending officer with whom you could meet face to face. While he might not meet your needs, at least he had the authority to take into account your own history and circumstances in his decision. Today these decisions are dictated by algorithm in some unseen office. The local bank branch looks the same, but it's now a powerless extension of a financial giant.

The same applies when you have a sinus infection and need to see a specialist. While you used to be able to call the doctor's office directly, and perhaps speak to someone you knew who could tell you if you needed to be seen, now you have to call an 800 number that routes you through an incomprehensible phone tree and eventually connects you, if you are lucky, with people who themselves are powerless.

While you may have grown up with this new-style bureaucracy and know nothing else, or simply grown accustomed to these new-style bureaucracies, in reality these changes have proliferated throughout our lives in lightning speed. This is the new normal.

You don't have to spend much time punching through a phone menu to realize that no one, besides you, is incentivized to care if you get a mortgage or heal your sinus infection. And, while you know that you're interacting with machines, the frustration, impersonality, powerlessness, and alienation you feel is reminiscent of something I've experienced before: the daily disaffection that eventually led people under communism to revolt. Americans (and many other peoples) have recently lost a lot of power and become disconnected from community in ways that can't entirely be explained by income or social inequality.

Concluding thoughts

Bureaucracy, government, and practically all things "public" are under enormous siege in the age of Trump. This comes at an already perilous moment. The forces of privatization, deregulation, and digitization, among others, have reorganized governance in a way that has weakened public institutions, apparently serving to make them less responsive to the people they are supposed to serve. This may well be connected to the collapse of public trust; wholesale disaffection is surely a key reason that voters have elected the likes of Trump and his counterparts elsewhere. Now that Trump is in power, he seems bent on attacking further these already weakened pillars of democratic society.

We need to rethink the role that a well-functioning bureaucracy might serve. The "public" must come back as a virtue. Establishing a vibrant public economy relies on bureaucracy – that is, bureaucracy that truly serves people. I am not arguing for a nostalgic throwback to pre-digital times. That is neither possible nor desirable. However, we need to reconsider developments such as the outsourcing of inherently governmental functions and the prevailing checklist approach to accountability. True accountability cannot be reduced to

[116] "Confidence in Institutions," *Gallup*, 2017, http://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx.

metrics that are poorly conceived, obscure the broader picture, and encourage momentary appearances over reality based on-the-ground assessments. True accountability must not be confused with performances of accountability that are severed from larger institutional knowledge, from the spirit of true accountability, and from the public's faith.

A robust public economy is needed to help restore public trust. No democratic society can survive indefinitely without it.

Author contact: jwedel@gmu.edu

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