

**The freelance project manager as an agent of governmentality:  
evidence from a UK local authority**

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## **Abstract**

Against the background of the era of economic austerity, this chapter presents case study evidence showing how efforts to promote project management at a British local authority rely on the work of freelance consultants. Inspired by Foucauldian scholarship, we conceive the expertise of project management as a technology of governmental power, commenting on the practices and identities of the consultants. We show them to be advocates of their own distinctive understandings and ways of enacting project expertise, whilst also showing how certain forms of tactical yet limited 'resistance' are defined by the key targets of their intervention: local government workers. The broader implications and dangers of project management for democracy in local government in the UK are considered.

**Key Words:** Governmentality; Neoliberalism; Freelance Project Managers; Local Government; Agency; Resistance



## **Introduction**

The deployment of project management (PM) expertise in UK local government, and the public sector more generally, has been widely noted. The ‘corporate professions’ of management consultancy and PM, or the ‘consultocracy’ (Hodge and Bowman, 2006), critics argue (Kipping *et al.*, 2006; Hodgson, 2007; Muzio *et al.*, 2011), have prioritised ‘marketisation strategies’ to inculcate this professional knowledge base in the UK public sector. Hodgson (2007) likewise argues that PM has emerged through a more general demand for ‘responsive’ and efficient organisational structures, financial accountability, fixed-term contracts and private-public partnerships, especially in ICT service provision. PM thus represents not only a form of knowledge and practice by which managers and consultants are expanding their influence in the public sector (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005), but also a key form of market-led and state endorsed knowledge and practice that neatly aligns with more centralised political aims.

This chapter sets the experience of a UK local authority, given the pseudonym here of ‘Northern County’, in a field of power relations amidst the politics of economic austerity in the 2010s. We examine the efforts of political actors and diverse ‘governmental’ authorities (Foucault, 1982; Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999) to normalise PM knowledge and practice as a solution to the struggles of local government. Drawing on data derived from a participant observation study conducted during 2011 and 2012, supplemented by interviews and access to relevant local authority documents and reports, we illustrate how attempts to encourage PM are reliant on the work of freelance consultants of PM expertise. As agents of projectification, these subjects were contracted project managers (PM) with significant experience in ICT transformational change and management consultancy in both private and public sectors. Crucial to a council wide programme for enhancing PM expertise across this

local authority, we comment on the identities and practices of five freelance PM consultants, showing them to be advocates of their own distinctive understandings and ways of enacting PM expertise. We go on to address the consequences and effects of this programme, illustrating how certain forms of tactical yet limited ‘resistance’ are defined by the key targets of this intervention; local government workers increasingly involved in project work at the local authority.

Inspired by Foucauldian scholarship (Dean, 1999; Munro, 2012) we go on to argue that PM knowledge and practice constitutes an exemplary technology of ‘governmental’ power; an inconspicuous bundle of concepts, techniques and professional competencies that aims to effect control ‘at a distance’ (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1999; Munro, 2012). We reflect on the diverse programmatic objectives and ambiguities at play in the messy implementation of this particular scheme of rule (McKinlay *et al.*, 2012). In doing so the implications and dangers for democracy in local government in the UK are addressed (Du Gay, 2000; Du Gay, 2008; Newman, 2014). We begin, however, with an account of the course of change at the local authority and the role that PM was intended to play in that process.

### **The case of ‘Northern County’ – an introduction**

Since the early 1980s local government in the UK has been subject to a series of political and economic reforms intended to make it more receptive to the requirements of central government (Forsyth, 1980; Miller, 2005; Newman, 2014). In the 1980s and 90s the Conservative government considered local government to be wasteful, excessively bureaucratic and acting in its own interests (Du Gay, 2000). Political autonomy was curtailed and funding was significantly reduced. Contracting out was imposed, decreasing the power of trade unions operative in the provision of local services (Brooke, 1991). There is a long history

of the deployment of management techniques in local government encouraged by the requirements of central government in this period. In general terms, however, local government became increasingly associated with contracting out, the performance monitoring of contracted out services, deteriorating employment conditions and work intensification (Patterson and Pinch, 1995).

‘New Labour’, coming to power in 1997, though hybrid in its programmatic ambitions for local government (Bevir, 2016), is commonly associated with the application of a more intensive management and monitoring regime. In particular, the system of audit and inspection associated with the Best Value programme was deployed to enhance quality and cost savings in the provision of local services (Power, 2004). This approach delimited autonomy for decision-making on the one hand and tied resource allocation to narrow dimensions of performance on the other. Contract-relations and budgetary accountability substituted direct managerial authority as a primary organising principle (Hebson *et al.*, 2003).

In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, local government in the UK witnessed unprecedented public expenditure and employment cuts, compounding the struggle to meet the needs of local services (Newman, 2014). Following the formation of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010, the UK was subject to the most severe public spending cuts since the Second World War (Yeates *et al.*, 2010). The coalition’s ‘Big Society’ programme, despite professing to ‘liberate’ communities and public service workers, emphasised a conservative communitarianism that sought to decentralise ‘duty and responsibility’ while radically reducing local government funding (HM Treasury, 2010b; Cameron, 2011).

Yet, at the Labour controlled 'Northern County', whilst cost saving measures would certainly be made in the months that followed, there would be no simple acquiescence to the politics of austerity. Statements of policy at Northern County affirmed the need for "transformational change to the operating culture of the Council" (Northern County, 2010c). There was to be a new emphasis on the sharing of services, information sharing and collaborative working to address the root causes of social problems and to improve 'customer' service. If cuts were necessary, citizens were to have a greater say over how they were to be made and, 'community' would, it was claimed, be strengthened. Local business enterprise would be encouraged to promote growth for the jurisdiction and play a part in the 'rebalancing' of the local economy that would see a significant reduction in public sector employment (Northern County, 2010a).

A strategic programme outlined changes to the management of the local authority. By early 2011, a severance scheme was in place and voluntary redundancy was offered to local government workers who qualified. Identifying potential candidates for redundancy took place in combination with a broader restructuring programme. Permanent members of staff across the local authority were required to re-apply for their positions. The expectation was that remaining staff should become more 'responsive' to the needs of their clients by displaying 'ownership' of policies, programmes and projects. Corporate themes alluding to the heightening of individual responsibility were addressed in subtle terms in an interview with Julia, the Deputy Chief Executive. Staff should not simply take responsibility, they should also become proactive in relation to the needs of their clients. As she stated, this was a matter of taking "initiative" and of being "flexible, responsive, customer focused".

These statements should be understood in the context of the changing priorities for local government associated with 'New Labour' during its final year in government, and in response to the repositioning of their opponents on the economy and 'austerity' (Seldon and Lodge,

2010). Inspired by new thinking in local government, and given the support of both the UK Government's Leadership Centre for Local Government and the Treasury's Operational Efficiency Review (Grint and Holt, 2011), the 'Total Place' initiative sought to bring local authorities, their partners and local citizens together in an effort to align service provision with the needs of the local population. Notions of the horizontal 'joining up' of public service policy and provision inspired an array of interventions during the years of 'New Labour': measures to promote economy and efficiency, to tackle complex, 'wicked' and costly social problems in a system of government understood to have been fragmented by the Conservatives. The objective was to enhance 'customer' experience through more seamless and integrated systems, and to address the multiple economic, social and environmental conditions that may enhance the quality of existence in a place (Cowell and Martin, 2003; Downe and Martin, 2006; Lyons, 2006). The report on the 'Total Place' pilot projects launched in 2009, in effect, gave a new salience and coherence to these diverse practices of 'joining up' (HM Treasury/Communities and Local Government, 2010), intimating a new way of framing the strategic 'leadership' role of local government, of renewing local democracy and supposedly enhancing local autonomy and choice. The 'Total Place' pilot projects, it was claimed, had shown what was possible with 'strong and coordinated local leadership'. All public service providers in a local area, including third sector organisations, it was professed, could work more effectively together. The pilot projects had allowed for the identification of areas of overlap and duplication in back office and support functions, thereby promoting 'efficiency'. They had allowed local partners to collocate services, to align budgets and implement joint outcomes with the aim of preventing difficult and costly social problems. The pilot projects had also included citizens in the collaborative planning of services to help to identify priorities and enhance 'joined up' service provision, emphasising the 'customer's' point of view. The UK government budget statement of March 2010 (HM Treasury, 2010a) announced an array

of measures in support of this ‘whole area’ approach to local government. Nevertheless, as the programmatic statement of the leaders of the Labour controlled Northern County in 2010 confirmed, ‘Total Place’ survived the demise of ‘New Labour’ in May 2010. The expertise of project management was then considered to be an essential means to the accomplishment of Northern County’s objectives.

### **Project management in the era of austerity**

Historically, the local authority as a whole had established its own PM methodology based on the government sponsored PRINCE2™ framework, first released through the UK Civil Service in 1996 (UK Cabinet Office, 2016). PRINCE2™ is an iteration of the project management method known as PRojects IN Controlled Environments (PRINCE), designed to separate projects into controlled stages while maintaining clear lines of accountability. Building on the earlier framework, PRINCE2 was conceived as a generic cross sector methodology, designed to be applicable to any project in the public or private sectors. At Northern County the goal had been to “standardise the basic processes of project management” (Northern County, 2009) in the aftermath of the establishment of the new unitary local authority in 2009, formed out of various district councils and the old county council. In taking PRINCE2™ as the norm, albeit adapted in the interests of simplicity and cost effectiveness, Northern County was following a familiar pattern in local government during the ‘New Labour’ years. During the 1990s the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), promoting ‘best practice’ and private/public partnerships, encouraged the development of this variant of project management expertise (de Groot, 2006). After 2003, efforts to enhance delivery and service procurement (Byatt, 2001) reinforced a new concern with the ‘capacity’ of local government. The joint LGA/Central Government Capacity Building initiative, supported by the inspection regime of the Audit Commission, further

encouraged the advancement of PM expertise as PRINCE2™ became accepted ‘best practice’ (DCLG, 2008; Audit Commission, 2009). A host of experts and authorities thus championed a methodology that defined financial, quality and risk control throughout the project ‘lifecycle’ as a primary organisational competency (CCTA, 1997; OGC, 2009). The key priorities were the ‘continual business justification’ of programmes and projects, clear alignment with corporate objectives (OGC, 2009: 21-28) and due attention to ‘continuous improvement’ in the deployment of PM capabilities (Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006).

Following the news of substantial budget cuts in June 2010 (HM Treasury, 2010b) the local authority was seeking to expand the provision of PRINCE2™ training (for details on PRINCE2™ training see the chapter by Shaw et al in this volume). For the ICT unit in particular there were additional pressures to expand provision. In late summer 2010, sanctioned and compiled by senior management, an independent assessment by a leading professional services firm criticised the ICT unit as lacking the necessary efficiency and effectiveness (Northern County, 2010b). A new investment programme was called for to install the technical infrastructure and encourage the necessary approach for the sharing of services, information sharing, project management and organising.

Within the ICT unit further training in PRINCE2™ was offered at various levels of professional competence: ‘professional’, ‘practitioner’ and ‘foundational’. It was anticipated that a small team of contracted freelance consultant project managers in the Corporate Programme Office (PO), as agents of projectification, would provide the impetus for extending know how. In line with the local authority’s new competency programme, staff would be expected to adopt a proactive approach to project organising. It should become the norm, as one of our senior interviewees put it, that “we constantly reflect on all our actions and activities and become more self-aware” (Marcus, Authority Learning and Organisational

Development Manager). Those experienced with PRINCE2™ at a higher level of proficiency would thus be encouraged to “champion” the technology as proactive educators. Change, in this view, was an “opportunity” for staff to learn best practice skills that would be needed, and a means for enhancing employability at a time of employment insecurity. The expectation was that staff, with expert guidance, would come to ‘embody’ the required practices such that little in the way of management would be required for the application of ‘joined up’ working and efficient and integrative systems in line with ‘Total Place’.

### **Enacting project expertise “with intelligence”**

The PO had been set up as a physically isolated office space within which ICT programme activities were managed. Here the programme manager, Paula, oversaw freelance consultants and permanent project managers authorising and overseeing projects. The freelance consultants were agency personnel brought in on six monthly contracts to encourage the required approach to projects and support programme activities. They had significant experience in PM and PRINCE2™ through delivering ICT change projects and management consultancy work in both private and public sectors. Some members of the PO group were also associated with the UK (APM) and US professional associations (PMI). Paula oversaw the process using a portfolio manager, making visible and reportable work activity within a PRINCE2™ framework. The status of all projects in the department were thus mapped through a ‘RAG’ (red, amber, green) projection, resembling the traffic light system favoured by the UK Government’s Office of Government Commerce (Bourn, 2004: 6) throughout the project lifecycle. Half hour project meetings took place weekly at which time the freelancers reviewed the RAG status of each project with senior managers.

Encountering these expert freelance consultants in the early stages of the change programme, we found them to be advocates of a know-how intended to ‘empower’ others to govern

themselves. These subjects assumed no requirement for high level proficiency among the targets of their intervention. Rather, a lower level of “awareness” of PM’s underlying principles was expected. In the discourse of “awareness” phrases such as “always get sign off”, “flag waving”, “auditability of the project” and “the only thing that matters is getting the job done” appeared to constitute fundamental rules of engagement. Above all there was an obligation to document and inscribe every decision and every action taken. Paula, for example, reiterated the PM canon of “completed as defined” when asked to define what she meant by ‘success’. Another, Darren, repeatedly used the terminology of putting “walls” around a project.

Nonetheless, for the freelance consultants governing through “awareness” was construed as different in kind from the true nature of PM expertise. They described their professional histories in the private sector as management consultants, project managers and ICT managers as constitutive of their professional practice and self-understanding. These subjects framed their relationship to projects in terms of “ownership”, denoting the achievement of personal goals and an expertise only available to the experienced practitioner. As evidenced in both the interviews and project meetings we attended, project “ownership” extended to identifying strategic targets among organisational actors proactively, with a view to building a community of interest. Acting to secure this community meant that one must actively campaign to achieve the PM canon of stakeholder “buy in”.

The tactical character of these practices was something that these freelance consultant project managers identified with in their work and life. Paula, for example, described a fusion of personal and work relationships as business like conversations, where it becomes “hard to get out of the mode of ‘what can I get out of this? what is at stake here?’”. They appeared to ‘own’ their projects to the point at which they would deploy combative mechanisms to secure

and protect delivery. Suggesting an expertise without formal programmatic status, to ‘own’ a project was ultimately to manipulate its course in accordance with appropriate, “intelligent” tactics of alliance building.

As custodians of expertise, the freelance consultants appeared to envision themselves as being at odds with their senior sponsors at Northern County. Paula, for example, commented that senior managers felt threatened by her professionalism. These subjects tended to query the use of PRINCE2™ in the public sector as “used simply as a process”, as contrasted with their own practice of “using PRINCE2™ with intelligence”. Though there were few indications of outright contestation, the difficulties that local government staff were experiencing in adapting to their new project roles early in the programme, and demonstrating ‘responsiveness’, was a theme to which the consultants often returned. As one of our interviewees, Theo, commented whilst indicating that he was viewed as a threat by ICT project staff: “They [ICT project staff] seem to tolerate a lack of progress. . . There is no traction on projects. . . they just seem to live with it. . . ‘if we [freelance consultants] can get you [ICT staff] doing your projects better, you are more likely to be retained than released”.

### **The identities of the freelance project experts**

Though working lives were reported as intensive, involving long hours and regularly responding to emergencies, all the freelance project managers we interviewed generally judged freelance project work to be a ‘solution’ through which one could learn to manage better, earn more, and lead a more satisfying life. Satisfaction for all the freelancers derived in part from a pastoral and supportive relationship with those who were understood to lack PM expertise at the local authority. These subjects were concerned to frame their work as a matter of caring for others, with their best interests and wellbeing in view. John, one of the freelance project managers in the Corporate Programme Office, explained in an interview

that his care for others meant that staff “have a much better ability to see what is coming over the horizon”.

In a distinctive way, life was addressed by these freelance project experts as something of a project in itself. In such instances the potential application of PM’s processes of rationalisation, such as in the “risk management” of one’s career, were seemingly ‘empowering’ and ‘productive’. In the case of John, making himself up as a freelance project manager relied on a discourse of self-actualisation. His own career was addressed as an adventurous journey and a vehicle for continual learning. As he stated, “there must be certain character traits that make a contractor. I was always left alone to do my own thing, so was everyone I know who was successful that I went to school with. . . I had a completely different upbringing to the kids I hung around with”.

Similarly, Darren described his work as a means to actively care for and generate respect for himself through continually changing and developing. Notable in this case was an account of more intimate personal relationships, articulated as coming second to his working life. It was “fickle, enjoyable relationships” that took precedence from this perspective. Furthermore, despite sympathising with the plight of staff at Northern County, vulnerable at the early stages of a restructuring programme, Darren constructed an identity in opposition to the working culture at the local authority and in response to what he judged to be an insensitivity towards the sovereign customer: “You’ve got a culture that is being indoctrinated, to protect your job, protect your pension, protect everything around you. And the customer?. . . You kind of wonder, well, why are you there to do that job?”

Notions of giving all of oneself, and then “grieving” for a project on its completion were also evident, calling upon discourses of self-realisation as projects were posed as all-

encompassing personal experiences. These themes would be emphasised further as ideas of independence were linked to continual stimulation and learning in project work. As Paula reflected: “Oh, it’s quite interesting, ‘cause I’ve been doing an operational role for the last 18 months. And we came to a major milestone. . .I walked into the office, day one, and thought, ‘Okay, what do I do now?’ Cause I’d delivered my work, you know? My project is now finished, even though I was in an operational role that goes on for the next 30 years, my brain says, ‘I’ve now delivered my project. What do I do now?’ So, I resigned”.

### **Ambivalence and insecurity – the experience of local authority staff**

The targets of the change programme were local government managers and lower level administrators set apart from the corporate programme office and increasingly involved in project work within a PRINCE2™ framework. The majority had been trained formally in PRINCE2™. Most had already experienced significant upheaval with the formation of a unitary Northern County in 2009. Amidst organisational restructuring, with budget and staff reductions, the 15 permanent employees that we interviewed found various ways to critique, or more exactly ‘distance’ themselves, from the objectives of the local authority programme.

On the one hand, the restructuring process could be experienced as an administrative inquisition. Northern County, as one permanent project manager Philip argued, was seeking to determine ‘who he was’ by having his whole career “boiled down” to “saying the right thing in an interview”. The favoured project measures of work and performance at Northern County for Philip, in effect, undermined the meaningfulness of working relationships, ignoring an established professional self. Brad, on the other hand, a permanent project manager, described a mode of professional conduct that emphasised the importance of tacit organisational knowledge. Knowledge of a more localised and reflexive kind was being devalued through the requirement to produce accountable project management truths.

In a related way, others bemoaned the need for the evaluation of projects in meetings and through the continuous updating of documentation. As one project manager, Jennifer, put it: “I’ve got better things to do than come and sit in and discuss what is right and what is wrong with projects”. Similarly, Simon, an administrator, stated: “There are less people to do the work and we’ve still got work outside of project work, a lot of work, you know?”. At times, critiques developed by local government staff shaded into a broader anti-professional critique. “For me”, as Jennifer put it during a discussion on PM methodology updates, “it is just a way for them [i.e. the project management professional associations] to make money. I understand it [PM methodology], but the thing is, I don’t need a bit of paper to tell me”. The recurring theme of professional self-interest was taken up by another manager, Eric. There was “an industry around it” he claimed. Here, a critique is advanced from the point of view of both the consequences of PM for work intensification and the superfluity of its expertise in fulfilling the real responsibilities of local government work. This mode of argument emphasises the self-serving activity of professional groupings through PM associations.

At other times, project managers and their lower level colleagues queried the programme less from the point of its questionable professional ambitions, and more in regard to the recruitment of highly paid freelance consultants. This concern related not only to the effects upon their own employment insecurity, but also a more general disquiet about the outsourcing of expert labour. At these moments, participants placed an emphasis on the worth, capabilities and skills of local government workers, as those capable of carrying out the work involved in the investment programme themselves, and as those who should be provided with the capabilities to do so. According to Tina, a permanent project manager, a lack of ‘investment’ in the workforce at the local authority meant that personal development had been neglected.

She questioned the procurement of contracted expertise: “We should have the skills in-house to do that work [the ICT investment programme], and if we haven’t then why haven’t we?. . .I mean, I do think they [freelance consultants] can bring a lot of experience, and they can bring knowledge of what has happened in outside areas, but in terms of council workers, it’s like ‘my job is on the line and you are paying how much for a contractor? That is like three years of my salary!’”

Statements of this kind appeared to be encouraged by the local government trade union. During our time at the authority the union was encouraging members to question the irrevocability of their situation and to act to avert the privatisation of labour and services. A key approach in this sense was its campaign to keep services in-house. Trade union documentation argued that staff were “the real experts” (Unison, 2012: 13) and should act to ensure their full involvement in programmes that might otherwise involve over-charging by consultants, resulting in substantial waste and the possibility of substandard service provision. Through this discourse the trade union posed an image of local government workers as ‘cost effective’ experts in their own right.

### **On ‘the tactics of the weak’**

Yet notwithstanding the various critiques and arguments discussed above, there were few indications of a desire for practical refusal. Jennifer, for example, deeply ambivalent, both attracted to the union discourse and sceptical of the claims of PM expertise, could nevertheless see benefit in PM as a way to realise autonomy in the labour market and end a working relationship that had become difficult and instrumental. This process in her case undermined a sense of collective identification with her colleagues but enabled her to foresee an alternative means of achieving a sense of ‘freedom’ in her working life, of doing:

“something independent, go off and do something different, or even take it [PM] somewhere else”.

Others discussed the advantages of PM knowledge and practice less as a means of realising their ‘human capital’, and more as a way of achieving safety and security at a time of crisis. In this respect, Harry, an ICT staff member with over twenty years of local government experience, described his hopes in using PM. In this case the benefits of expertise in an internal interdepartmental struggle were foregrounded; “Well, hopefully they’ll [senior management, other departments in the council] see more of what we’re doing”. Making oneself and one’s department visible and accountable through PM is addressed here as a way to demonstrate to others that both he and his department are performing (“they might see our worth a little bit more”). This argument is framed as a critique of having been left outside a formal network of accountability. Yet ultimately, there is an alignment between the judgements of a local actor and a broader governmental regime.

Another ICT staff member, Robert, with over twelve years of local government experience, explained his hopes in a similar way. As he put it: “I think it’s easier to show the management what we actually do (by using PRINCE2™)”. As the ICT unit’s role in cost reduction across the authority took effect and became known, the defensive appeal of PM knowledge and practice was considerable for these subjects. Security became a matter of personal and departmental concern, so much so that these self-governing subjects appeared willing to abide by the ‘rules of the game’. A related point was taken up by another of our subjects as he described a particular form of ‘empowerment’. The ‘liberating’ aspect of PM’s governmental rationality would, Eric believed, provide a platform from which to state his case to his superiors. He would, as a manager, be better placed to proactively justify the economic rationale for the

continuation of the IT department's work through the means of PM knowledge and practice, thus promoting the security of his own and his colleague's future employment.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Munro (2012), adapting Dean (1999), characterises PM as a technology of agency and performance, one of an array of contemporary management techniques of government designed to guide apparently autonomous or free actors towards the achievement of specified ends. As such, the freelance purveyors of PM expertise under examination in our case can be conceived of as agents of governmentality. Contextualising their intervention in a field of power relations, the era of austerity and efforts by an array of authorities to normalise PM expertise in UK local government, our analysis of these essentially entrepreneurial consultants suggests they had found a means of self-expression in a working life akin to Handy's (1991) vision of the portfolio career. As PM, with its identity affirming images, interpellates or successfully hails these entrepreneurial subjects, a relay is established between the aspirations of governing authorities and a particular local field of power relations, echoing arguments elsewhere in this volume (see chapters by Buttner and Leopold and Shaw et al). In this respect we would suggest a kind of pastoral logic (Foucault, 1978) in the way participants commonly described the deployment of project expertise as a matter of caring for others, implying a shepherding of the 'flock' towards a new understanding with their best interests and well-being in view. This pastoral manner, which has been used by others to frame the practice of clinical leaders in the reform of the UK Health Service (Ferlie *et al.*, 2013; Waring and Martin, 2016), would thus seem to have a wider applicability.

At the same time, for our freelance consultants projects also possessed an 'expressive' character. These subjects framed their relationship to projects in terms of notions of

‘ownership’, implying the achievement of personal goals and a kind of ‘between us’ expertise only available to the experienced practitioner. PM possessed a powerful, identity affirming character, an appropriate, and even ideal career outlet for the ‘freedom loving’ consultant. Although working lives were conveyed as demanding, involving responses to crises (Eaton and Bailyn, 2000; Packendorff, 2002) and ‘bereavement’ upon the completion of projects, projects were also judged a ‘solution’ through which one could accumulate wealth and lead a more fulfilling life (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Muzio *et al.*, 2011). The career was indeed, it seemed, a project of the self (Grey, 1994). Yet transcending Grey’s concept of life subordinated to the career principle, for these subjects, notions and practices associated with PM expertise provided a framework through which other non-working aspects of life could be framed. ‘Private’ norms of calculation and aspiration could be realised, where life itself, at least for some of our subjects, was amenable to project management. In such instances the potential application of PM’s processes of rationalisation were indeed wide ranging, ‘enabling’ and ‘productive’.

Pursuing a critical Foucauldian analytic further (Barratt, 2008), how might we assess the costs of the case we have been considering? We would argue that ‘Total Place’, which PM was designed to support in our study of a local authority, should not be viewed as merely another attempt to make political institutions function in a ‘quasi-business’ manner (Diefenbach, 2009: 893). Alongside efficient and effective government, the supposed enhancement of ‘community’, ‘partnership’, ‘resilience’ and, perhaps most of all, democracy, were also crucial objectives. Undoubtedly parochial in its sense of ‘place’, indifferent to the global institutions and forces that seek to govern ‘places’, and overly submissive to the economics of austerity (McKinnon, 2016), Total Place should not be diagnosed as simply another manifestation of a ‘neoliberal rationality’ of government (Bevir, 2016).

PM, then, in this case is implicated in a hybrid scheme of government (Newman, 2005; Bejerot and Hasselbladh, 2011). For us, it is the tensions and contradictions of this specific hybrid scheme that are most striking. The stated ends of the expert freelancers suggest an orientation at odds with other objectives of 'Total Place', notably the enhancement of supposedly democratic ends. To imagine oneself in a relation of 'ownership' to one's work is to undermine the core principle of political accountability. Notions of 'public service' and 'public accountability' were noticeably absent in the discourse of our consultant subjects. Ultimately their practice evokes the 'managerial stratum' characterised by Hirst (1996): members of a group, relatively homogeneous in attitudes, aspirations and working methods, readily moving between public and private sectors. The manner in which such work devalues and undermines the ethics and practices of public institutions, poses a profound threat to democratic ends.

The prospect of the extension and institutionalisation of PM expertise within the framework of Total Place and planned by the local authority, came with further contradictions and tensions. As such, the technology of PM is vulnerable to an array of criticisms of the deployment of management methods in the public sector (Du Gay, 2000). When the activities of local government are redefined in terms of the specification of 'outputs' encapsulated in performance indicators, projects and contracts (Power, 1994) there is not only a weakening of local political accountability but a delegitimisation of public provision (Newman, 2014). In project based organising local government officers are assigned powers disproportionately in practices which 'empower' them. As the work of government is redefined in managerial terms, bureaucratic ideals of impartiality and integrity associated with the defence of the public interest in a democratic polity are undermined (Du Gay, 2000). When the work of government is conceived in large part as an expert, technical and managerial activity, the

space for the practice of democratic citizenship and political engagement contracts (Brown, 2015).

As we have seen, however, efforts to enhance PM expertise among local government workers engaged in project based work were not unproblematic. The early stages of the new initiative saw its targets identifying ways to rebuff and critique, or more exactly ‘distance’ themselves from governmental discourses. For many there was another side to the new performance requirements, with permanent project managers and staff at the authority bemoaning the continuous inscribing of project activities. There were material concerns at stake, in a context of restructuring and the performance of additional project related work. Perhaps most common of all was the problem of the devaluation of local knowledge. Notions of tacit knowledge embedded in the working environment, evoking Michael Polanyi’s (Polanyi, 1958; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995) concept of ‘personal knowledge’, implied certain inherent limitations to the knowledge of external experts. In other instances, PM expertise was contested in the name of values and practices associated with the advancement of the public interest (Osborne, 1994; Du Gay, 2000; Barratt, 2009). This argument could be extended into a broader critique of the self-serving goals of PM as a profession, evoking neoliberal critiques of the pursuit of monopoly rents by professional bodies (Leicht and Lyman, 2006).

Nevertheless, for all the rebuffing, the logic of PM pervaded the discourse of local government workers. In this respect, our study suggests once again an array of perhaps more surprising ‘productive’ effects. For some disenfranchised local government staff, PM expertise for all its weaknesses, was viewed as a standardised and reproducible form of ‘human capital’ (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004; Weiskopf and Munro, 2012), offering a ‘way out’ of the authority at a time of considerable turbulence and insecurity. Most common of all,

however, was the tactical use for PM expertise. It was not PM's 'liberating potential' or the more intimate rewards of project (or contract) 'success' and 'delivery' that was at stake. Rather PM became seductive and necessary as a 'defensive' resource, for demonstrating personal and departmental achievements, thus protecting employment at a time of insecurity. We have illustrated a mode of 'resistance', a tactical reversal (Foucault, 1978) or a turning around of instruments of power (de Certeau, 1984). Critics argue (Rose, 1999) that subjects of government who are granted responsible autonomy, are increasingly required to act according to a 'litigious mentality' in order to defend and justify their value and existence. Employees, whilst seeming to rebuff some of the effects of governmental discourses still, ultimately, reproduced them in a variety of ways. Fleming and Spicer (2003) have argued for the need to document the many different forms that 'dis-identification' can take in contemporary organisations: the moments at which organisational actors abjure dominant discourses, only to reaffirm them in their actions. Dis-identifications in our case took diverse forms: in the expression of distrust for managers and their schemes, the professions, or indeed in a commitment to local knowledge and the customary values and practices of local government work.

Albeit in different ways, then, it is the expertise of PM that subjects look to for a way out of their predicament. Such 'resistance' had little to do with efforts to overturn the influence of PM expertise, or even active support for the union, let alone the defence of local government as a 'strategic' site for vital conditions that enable autonomy, solidarity and citizenship (Newman, 2014). Indeed, in so far as they appear to set members of departments and individuals against one another in a competitive game such resistance appears to us especially divisive. We should look elsewhere for the possibility of effective forms of resistance to the shattering of local government, perhaps to those movements of the left debating the question

of the organisation of the State (e.g. Shah and Goss, 2007) or the alliances of public sector trade unionists and activists that have emerged in response to austerity.

Finally, should we take the ubiquity of 'projects' in our study as a sign of the 'projectification' of society, a concept favoured by some critics to capture wide ranging changes in society informed by project based concepts (Lundin and Soderholm, 1998)? After Foucault (Foucault, 1991; Dean, 1994) we remain suspicious of any global and epochal sociological diagnosis, with its implicit assumption of a unifying principle of social organisation and mode of argument that leaves little sense of a 'way out'. Ultimately our study of agents of projectification and the consequences of their intervention in a hybrid scheme of rule has sought to achieve a more modest ambition: to diagnose the effects of the deployment of a prevalent form of management expertise in a specific, endangered institutional setting.

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