

Trump, Foucault and pre-modern governance

and

First and second drafts of history

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This submission is made up of two short essays linked by a chain of thinking that becomes evident as their stories unfold. The first reflects contemporary events against an interpretation of history Michel Foucault started to develop in the last few years of his life. That view is itself reflected against events of the not-too-distant past in the context of strategic leadership of a global enterprise with deep UK roots.

The second is a reflection on those reflections. It ponders what the first and second drafts of history have to say about the nature of news and social science research, and how we tell such stories.

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Trump, Foucault and pre-modern governance

“No one ever accused this company of being a democracy!” – Private comment of a CEO of a major multinational corporation, overheard ca. 1990

This quote came to mind as I read the news about one of Donald J. Trump’s executive orders, signed in Week 1 of his Presidency of the United States. On the first full day in the office, the CEO-in-the-White-House invited a group of CEOs of major US corporations to discuss the future governance of America. CEOs have been practising *corporate* governance forever, and must know a thing or two about it. By the end of the meeting, surely they knew a lot more, because they were there to learn from each other, and from Trump.

The Economist magazine, in its extended “Briefing” item the following week, said Trump’s advisers believe that he has “a mandate to blow up norms of good governance” (The Economist, 2017). Let us explore, then, what governance means.

Trump’s ban on arrivals of citizens of seven, mainly Muslim states was one of those executive orders, though it was quickly, if temporarily, set aside by the courts. Petulantly, like a CEO annoyed by an underling, Trump ranted (a more accurate description than the sweet-sounding “tweeted”) against the judges who dared to defy him. Was he not the Leader of the Free World, as the “lying press” he despised kept telling us he was? Was he not President of the first democracy of the modern era, carrying out the will of the people?

This vignette brings to mind another line of thought about governance. In the late 1970s, the French sociologist Michel Foucault delivered a series of lectures at the Collège de France, on security, territory and population (Foucault, 2009). In one of them he reflected on the term “governmentality”, a neologism without clear definition.

Foucault’s puzzle was this: What led the people of Europe, with their broad acceptance during the Renaissance of the divine right of kings, to embrace an entirely different form of governance? The new one was based on the power of central administration and guided, at least in part, by dispassionate and rational processes, and not the whims of a monarch. He talked of the sense of order implicit in Machiavelli’s *Prince*, where what the choice is right leads to actions that can sustain popular faith in the ruler’s absolute authority, even without agreement in the rightness of the decision. But other decisions might destroy that faith.

In the later period, faith transferred to the state, the apparatus of bureaucracy, and emerging “technologies” of governance. The word “governmentality” sounded at once like a *mentality of governance* and the *ability to reconceive government*.

What happened between the Renaissance and the Enlightenment was, of course, the Thirty-Years’ War. It lasted most of the first half of the 17th Century. An estimated eight million people died, among them nearly a third of the population of the German states and principalities. Protestants and Catholics slaughtered each other over articles of faith, which had disguised the territorial ambitions of kings and princes.

Its horror failed to destroy faith in God – we would have to wait until after the Second World War for that to spread through Europe. But it sapped support for monarchies. Their

popular legitimacy waned, unleashing a fervent desire for an age of reason, which Toulmin (1992) describes and then challenges so well. It also set the stage for the unenlightened, unreasoning of the French Revolution. Democratic at first, French revolutionists soon reverted to pre-modern barbarism, halted only when Napoleon Bonaparte declared himself Emperor, reasserted order in France, and conquered much of Europe.

But before that, Modernism had ushered in an enlightened revolution, the American one, which established democracy, albeit in a limited way. The Constitution enfranchised the population broadly: initially only white and, in some places, property-owning males, before broadening after a barbarous Civil War threatened the country and Constitution. One political structure – the Electoral College – sought to block a rabble from electing populist demagogues as President. (Yes, I appreciate the irony.) By creating three co-equal branches of government it also constrained any President from being able to rule as if by divine right.

Reading Foucault's lecture in 2011, I reflected on the big news story of that time: *The News of the World*, a venerable British newspaper owned by Rupert Murdoch's News Corp., and directed by his son James, had spent much effort and money hacking into the mobile phone messages of celebrities.

The celebrities' vociferous protests did little to halt the practice, but then the paper hacked the mobile phone of a child who had vanished and was feared dead. The journalists deleted the accumulating voicemails from her worried parents and friends, making room for more, but only after harvesting their content, names and phone numbers. In so doing, the journalists had – unwittingly or not, we can't be sure – led the family and police to conclude the girl was still alive and, well, a runaway, not a victim.

In the wake of a popular outcry, the Murdochs closed down the newspaper. A subsequent judicial inquiry laid out new and still disputed governance arrangements for the press (Petley, 2012). The controversy also saw the Murdochs appear before a British parliamentary committee, on what the elder Murdoch declared, ungrammatically, the “most humble day of my life” (Guardian, 2011).

Reflecting on their televised encounter, I came to see Rupert Murdoch as something of a Foucault-like version of Machiavelli's prince. He seemed wilful, self-absorbed and self-justifying, but at risk of forfeiting his “divine right” through clumsy slaughter of the source of his legitimacy: Journalism, while whimsical and often imperious and undemocratic, nonetheless performs a social good. Was this, then, a metaphor for CEOs in general? Isn't corporate governance, after all, the attempt to pull corporations out of the pre-modern ways of working, into the modern?

Fast forward to the White House on January 23, 2017. The collection of CEOs in Washington that day included the chiefs of Ford, Dell Computer, Fiat-Chrysler and a roomful of others, summoned there by CEO-cum-President Trump. In a Foucauldian view, the assembled CEOs seemed like little princes, each sovereign in his own principality but obeisant. Their wills would be obeyed in their own territories, but they would obey, be subservient to, his will: America First.

The end of the Thirty Years' War marked beginning of what historians call the Modern Era. Modernism asserted a belief in rationality, a belief that truth could be found in science, not just religion, and, in Foucault's notion of governmentality, a belief that the state, in whatever form it took, was there to serve the people, not the people to serve powerful but

non-state rulers. The world of wilful princes and absolute monarchs had disappeared, and Modernism flourished in statecraft, if not in corporate boardrooms.

Foucault was keenly aware of the limitations of Modernism. Its very rationalism had served as a tool to rationalise the slaughter of Jews under the Nazis, not to mention the eugenics practiced by Nazi sympathisers, and persecutions of minorities everywhere, including homosexuals, and the suppression of women.

The world Foucault depicted was one of painful complexity and interdependence, one in which chains of command were technologies of discipline and freedom perhaps unachievable in any tangible sense. But let us recall that, in the view of historian Garry Wills, the intentions of Thomas Jefferson in drafting the Declaration of Independence were an assertion not so much of individual liberty, but rather of complexity and interdependence (Wills, 1978).

Is Trump, in some sense, a post-modern President? This argument suggests he is not. It points instead to a reversion to pre-modern times. He has acted, at least, like the CEO of pre-modern *corporate* governance days, before the modernizing of the Cadbury Code (1992) in the UK sought to constrain “unfettered power” of CEOs. Its provisions to do so – by creating checks and balances in the boardroom along the lines of the US Constitution – were also recommended in US listing rules after Enron, WorldCom and many others failed (Nasdaq, 2002; NYSE, 2003).

The most successful CEOs are often imperious, of course. A case in point is Rupert Murdoch and his success in building a small Australian newspaper into the empire of global news, entertainment, book publishing, film and television we now know as News Corp. and 21st Century Fox. His case shows that the lack of external constraint, coupled with ambition, ideas and personal self-control can lead to superior outcomes.

But the evidence is mixed (Boyd, 1995; Dalton & Dalton, 2011). Think of Jeffrey Skilling’s Enron, or Bernie Ebbers’ WorldCom. These counter-examples recall that Machiavelli’s *Prince* was not so much an essay in praise of the Pre-modern as an anticipation of pragmatism and contingency.

And *public* governance is different from *corporate* governance. Consider this: Markets in products and service, and particularly in capital, constrain the imperious CEO even when board structure and codes cannot. Shareholders can always sell and walk away. But there is only a very narrow market for nationalities and homelands. And in the US that market has just got smaller, by order of the chief executive.

Trump’s executive orders, on border control and other matters, suggest a wilful, self-absorbed and self-justifying mentality of governance that echoes the world of princes and divine right of kings that the Thirty Years’ War destroyed. And Wills (2017), drawing on Trump’s obsessive hair styling and tweeting, sees something imperial in this President, and not in a flattering sense.

The protest marches that followed Trump’s inauguration and executive orders, in Washington and many other cities across the country and around the world, suggest large parts of the population are not willing to return to a notion of governance that accepts any divine right at its core, let alone the Machiavellian actions of princes, even if those actions could “make America great again”.

Large parts of American society – Trump’s supporters and those doubtful but loyal Republicans who say he is our only President, for now – think differently, however. And they may be content, for now. But popular dissatisfaction with both the rationalism of Modernism and the complexity of Post-modernism isn’t strong enough to usher in a reversion to pre-modern governance. Trump’s election may be a big moment in history. Just not that big. We can hope so, at least.

And this: After the frantic first few weeks of his Presidency, who would accuse the Trump & Co. White House of being a democracy?

First and second drafts of history

The essay above emerged from my sense of urgency to say something about contemporary events. The paper doesn’t fit easily into any category – too topical to be academic, too intellectualized to be journalism, too lacking in conviction to count as political commentary in today’s shrill debate. It uses historical analysis in a contemporary context, filtered through contemporary history still relevant through the close associate of the actors in 2011 with the occupant of the White House in 2017 (Picard & Garrahan, 2017). This essay is neither journalism nor history nor social science, at least in a conventional sense. It is a piece of writing that seems to have no home, and yet is something I felt impelled to put onto at least the digitized form of paper – a citizen’s howl about democracy.

It was a reaction to news and a (first, preliminary, half-digested) account of something nonetheless salient (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Democracy, whatever that means in detail, gives the citizen – *me* – legitimacy to raise matters of concern, a claim warranted by the freedom of speech granted in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. Its power is difficult to determine in an era of instant (“fake”?) news and the unending stream of words in social media, on television, not to mention in academia. But power can be intensified by using such platforms to amplify the message.

As the verbal decibel count rises, it conveys urgency as well, but the urgency itself stems from the sense that something is going very wrong. We had better do whatever we citizens, outside the corridors of power, can do to keep our social and political systems from running off track. This is the *salience* of citizen journalism, even when this citizen was himself once an old-style, traditional journalist.

Journalism is often called the "first draft of history", however rough that draft might be (Edy, 1999).¹ In the old days – a time traditional journalists like to recall but with little of the documentation that real historians demand – news reporters sought the truth.

Their – *our* – mental maps were probably only crude approximations of the intellectual terrain they – *we* – encountered. Perhaps the batteries in their – *our* – search beacons were flat from having consumed too much “juice” the night before. Tales from the trenches may go down well in conversations around the bar after the newspaper had gone to bed or the newscast was finished. But as some of them – *us* – set off to academia to look more seriously

into researching social phenomena, many found their – *our* – limited methodologies wanting.

Social science might be termed the *second* draft of history, still rough around the edges but with digestion at least underway. But social science is slow, made slower still by arcane processes of peer review, designed to verify the results of empirical tests of positivist assertions, if not always so well vitality in argumentation. Meanwhile the escalation of conflict between journal publishers over which wins the highest “impact factor” has intensified, as even relatively low-ranked journals show off their firepower by length of their editorial boards and bragging about their rejection rates.

And yet, social science research faces a counter pressure for speed, for making the second draft of history available as soon as possible after the first. Journals set time limits for reviewers to issue their judgments – their rejections, their revise-and-resubmits, their reject-and-resubmits. As a result ideas often bounce through three journals and several years of consideration before finding their way, belatedly, into what we used to know as “print”. There they rest, destined rarely to be read even when they have been cited.

These and related dysfunctions in the processes of academic publishing have been well discussed in the editorializing of journal editors (e.g. Bedeian, 2003, 2004; Byron & Thatcher, 2016; Cloutier, 2016; Davis, 2014, 2015; Hillman, 2011). The thoughts the Trump essay provoked about it concern what response an academic should make to this state of affairs in trying to public the second draft of history, when the affairs of state seem so pressing.

One avenue that seems to be opening arises from the editors of those journals who worry that “impact factors” are an oxymoron. Many scholars care about the disconnect between management research and management (Antonacopoulou, 2009; Learmonth, Lockett, & Dowd, 2012; Mirvis, 2014; Thorpe, Eden, Bessant, & Ellwood, 2011). In response, journal editors are changing their practices.

For example, the *Journal of Management Inquiry* has an occasional feature called “Provocations and Provocateurs”, *Human Resources Management Journal* publishes “Provocations”, while *Strategic Organization* has its “SO!apbox”. Writers have to earn their way, through a history of scholarly achievement, to be granted the license to practice the freedom to think out loud in such spaces.

For those less established, and so perhaps with less of an establishment orientation, other vehicles have emerged. Social Science Research Network, founded by Michael Jensen of Jensen and Meckling (1976) fame, gave scholars a platform, if not quite a soapbox, to experiment with less well-developed ideas. With the corporate governance scandals of the early years of the new century, SSRN quickly became the place where scholars might even influence public policy formation before the sloth-like world of academic publishing cranked itself into (slow) motion. Purchased by Elsevier/Science Direct in 2016, the SSRN experiment could either become mainstream or be sapped of its energy and charm. Berkeley Electronic Press offers another such forum. And there are more.

The second draft of history, of at least part of it, is therefore getting faster, dragging traditional academic publishing with it, but with what consequences for academic debate? Download statistics seem to be creeping into use as a metric for academic success, alongside

journal league tables and impact factors. Yet promotion and tenure (where still available) seem not to depend much on promoting oneself through these less conventional means.

Through technology, an apparatus of power in Foucault's view of history, the "first draft" is now, increasingly, unfiltered at input and filtered by "likes" and "shares" upon receipt. It broadens its data while narrowing the data available for personal analysis to those that suit the assumptions of those seeking to analyze it. Through its own dysfunction, the "second draft" is bifurcating into a slow channel seemingly intent on irrelevance and a somewhat faster one that has not yet learned that for its salience it needs power and urgency as well as legitimacy.

The essay on Trump, Foucault and Pre-Modern Governance is a small effort to nudge contemporary political debate onto another line of inquiry. As a homeless essay, however, its lack of power will sap whatever energy might come from its urgency and legitimacy. If you found anything in it stimulating, think: Where could it find a home?

In its form – and the many other demarches penned in response to the Trump Presidency – it harks back to the days of the essay, to what in the 18th century and the founding of the American republic were a combined first-and-second draft of history. That was before the Enlightenment project took a narrow, empiricist turn and Modernism put on its miserablist 20th century cloak (Toulmin, 1992).

This essay was as its foundation, then, a plea for urgency and argumentation making reference to, and drawing from, the lessons of thoughtful scholarship and scholarly thinking. But it leaves open the question of where such essays can find a source of power and how they can find an audience.

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¹ The origin of the phrase is somewhat unclear (Shafer, 2010). The expression gained currency, however, through Philip Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post*, in many statements, including an article in *Public Administration Review* (Graham, 1953).