

# Managing the Employee's Soul: Foucault applied to modern management technologies

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## Abstract

*This paper presents an alternative approach to analyse power in modern organizations. It does so by applying Foucauldian concepts to new types of management technologies, which are directed at the employee's personality. Most often, studies of power and management focus on organizational structures, power games between groups and issues of how to manage processes within and between organizations. We rarely talk about what could be termed 'the management of personality'. This paper argues, however, that this kind of Human Resource Management is becoming increasingly important and should be a key focus in critical organizational analysis. It also discusses the consequences and possibilities for employees facing a proliferation of management-of-personality technologies.*

Keywords: HRM, power, personnel-management, Foucault, technology, critical organizational studies.

## Resumo

*Este artigo apresenta uma abordagem alternativa para a análise do poder em organizações modernas, a partir de conceitos de Foucault voltados a novos tipos de tecnologias de gerência referentes à personalidade do empregado. Comumente os estudos de poder e gerência têm como foco estruturas organizacionais, jogos de poder entre grupos e questionamentos acerca do controle de processos dentro das organizações e entre elas. Nós raramente discutimos o que poderia ser denominado de 'gerência da personalidade'. Este artigo pondera, entretanto, que esse tipo de gerência de recursos humanos está se tornando cada vez mais importante e deve ser um foco chave na análise crítica das organizações. Além disso, discute também as conseqüências e as possibilidades para os empregados que enfrentam a proliferação de tecnologias de gerência-da-personalidade.*

Palavras-chave: HRM, poder, administração de pessoal, Foucault, tecnologia, estudos organizacionais críticos.

*"Being on the move, once a privilege and an achievement, becomes a must. Keeping up speed, once an exhilarating adventure, turns into an exhausting chore" (Bauman, 2003: xiii).*

## Introduction

This paper argues that there is a current tendency in Human Resource Management where employees should now become 'self-responsible' and 'self-initiating', making use of their full personality on their jobs. We see a proliferation of new and creative management technologies that have precisely this objective. Further, the paper suggests that these technologies can be studied and critically evaluated by drawing upon concepts in Michel Foucault. By using two case studies of management technologies the paper demonstrates how the employee is made to speak about the goals of his personal development. The intensified focus on the employee's personality as a resource and a field of intervention breaks fundamentally with classic management principles. In conclusion, the paper discusses the consequences of this management-of-personality trend and considers whether it should be described as a levelling of power relations or as a more subtle form of domination. The article does

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not claim to describe the lived reality in organisations, but gives a diagnosis of current tendencies in HRM-discourse and in the development of frontline HRM-technologies.

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### How do we think about power and management?

In organisational analysis, power is most often conceived as something that is exercised between groups—that is, for instance, between managers and employees, between different groups of professionals or between different generations of organisation members (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988), between more or less ‘powerful’ positions (Kanter, 1979) or between managers who act in accordance with management values and professionals who act in accordance with professional values and knowledge (Lynn, 1998; Kirkpatrick & Ackroyd, 2003). Furthermore, most often power is seen as something that is exercised top-down, from leaders and managers downwards at employees, as witnessed in a large number of studies of effective leadership and top managers’ power (Flinkelstein, 1992; Pitcher & Schmidt, 2001). In these analyses, power is predominantly seen as a capacity that some actors possess and exercise with more or less success. In a number of other cases, power is conceived as something that is exercised between organisations or is inscribed within organisational fields, such as in neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991).

Today, however, this approach to power does not seem to adequately catch the powers at work in modern organisations. The technologies and strategies employed presently seem to follow quite a different logic. Currently, power seems to be increasingly decentred or delegated. Power should not be exercised authoritatively from the top, as this would represent an old fashioned, ‘out-of-date’ type of management. The objective of modern power is, as Michel Foucault has shown us, to make people active in their own self-government. Foucault (1977) argued that modern power differs from discipline or sovereign power in that it takes as its basic premise that individuals are free and therefore operates by seeking to shape their free actions. Put roughly, people should not be disciplined ‘from the outside’, but should be made ‘self-disciplining’. Power, then, operates in individuals’ self-relation and the micro-relations between individuals. For modern management this means that management should not be exercised in a commanding, controlling or disciplinary fashion. Rather than acting directly upon individuals, one must use forms of government that connects to individuals’ self-government. Or we could say that modern management must be ‘a management of individuals’ self-management’.

Current management literature proclaims that management is not about dictating, controlling or putting demands at people, but should have as its objective to make individuals active and initiating. Employees should not be told what their specific role is, or specifically what the organisation needs from them. Rather, employees should become self-initiating, take responsibility, and see for themselves what the organisation needs. Career is now presented as ‘transgressing traditional boundaries’—it cuts across hierarchies, companies and professional domains, but it is for each employee to take charge of it and shape his individual career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996: 3 ff). Modern work-life is said to give employees new and unforeseen possibilities for building and reshaping their identities: “*It does not restrict career to being a sequence of positions (jobs), but is a series of events, experiences and actions*” (Larsen, 2004: 863). It is a matter of being unique, of carving out a career and an identity of our own. To conform and do the expected is not the way to take responsibility, or the road to pay raise and promotion. Those who just adapt and act according to the norm do not make characters of themselves. According to the new HRM-discourse it is better to diverge than to adapt (Rennison, 2007: 7).

Popular buzzwords that have emerged recently include: ‘involvement’, ‘participation’, ‘personal fulfilment’, ‘employee-ownership of values’, ‘delegation of competence’, ‘innovation from below’ and more. They articulate the same fundamental principle: the employee should not be told what to do, but should be stimulated so as to ‘take initiatives by his own initiative’. The basic premise is increasingly that organisational development, the formulation of values, the setting up of strategies, cannot be initiated from the top but should spring from independent reflections of every employee. So, the development of the organisation and the personal development of the employees must take place in a simultaneous, interrelated fashion. A parallel movement needs to be established, then, between organisational development and the personal development of employees.

Yet, the new management trend does not speak in terms of shaping the personalities of employees in order to accommodate organisational needs. Rather, the new management technologies present themselves as if they

were representing an objective reality or—even better—as if they were operating to *uncover* a naturally existing order (Townley, 1993: 525). Current HRM thus gives the impression that it is there to reveal the ‘natural’ or ‘immanent’ potentials and abilities of employees, not that it seeks to transform subjectivities in a specific direction. Where does this development leave studies of power in organisations? How can we study the strategies aimed at making individuals self-responsible, initiating and personally involved in their organisation? This article adopts a conception of power as not only exercised between individuals or groups but as inscribed in individuals’ self-relation.

## Modern power

There already exist a number of significant studies that critically analyses the new management focus on employee’s personality. Rose examined the historical emergence of HRM technologies as part of a wider psychological complex (1994; 1996); Townley has demonstrated how HRM make use of disciplinary practices and confessional technologies (1993; 1998); and Andersen suggests that a pedagogical discourse has invaded the organisation-employee relationship (2007; Andersen & Born, 2001). These contributions draw somehow or another upon Foucault as a frame of inspiration. This paper shares the same source of inspiration, yet it takes a more circumscribed point of departure as it investigates how far one single concept can take the analysis, namely, Foucault’s concept of self-technology. More specifically, it is the employment of self-technologies by current management strategies that is of critical interest here.

During the last decades, many followers of Foucault have taken a key interest in Foucault’s concept of governmentality, which received wider attention through his famous lecture entitled ‘Governmentality’ (Foucault, 1991). There, Foucault used governmentality to designate the historical process through which, in Western Europe, the administrative state was transformed into a modern welfare state—‘governmentalized state’ resting on new social sciences and new technologies for optimising the welfare of the population.<sup>1</sup> The modern state was no longer to be a centre of authoritative and repressive powers but would base itself on ‘productive’, governmental technologies employed by state *and* non-state agents to create and shape specific forms of subjectivity (1991: 103).

Foucault, therefore, launched a vigorous attack on the conception of the modern state as a centre of repressive powers, which has been dominant in political theory and still is influential in organisational theory. According to Foucault (1981), this ‘juridico-political’ conception of power fails to grasp that modern power is not repressive in its objectives. Moreover, conceptualising power in terms of the state, sovereignty, leadership, hierarchy and so on implies that power is localisable and limitable. This conception, in Foucault’s view, misses the essence of modern power, namely that its objective is not to suppress but to make individuals self-governing and that it works through individuals’ own free actions. Modern power, then, does not spring from the state apparatus and is not exercised ‘top-down’ but is rather to be found in all the mundane micro-social relations (Foucault, 1981: 92). It inscribes itself in the micro-relations between, for instance, doctor and patient, social worker and client or between manager and employee. In this perspective, the classic organisational pyramid is merely a specific modern way of codifying the problem of government and cannot be used as a foundation for analysing power. Discussing how to minimize repressive power by putting a limit on authoritative ‘power-holders’ or by abolishing hierarchical structures (e.g. Kanter, 1979) is an insufficient approach to modern government and management.

Let us turn to another definition of governmentality that can be found in Foucault—a definition, which seems better suited to make adequate and critical analysis of present management. In a later lecture, *Technologies of the self*, Foucault simply defines governmentality as the specific modern mentality of government, which implies that government (or management) must be directed at individuals’ self-government (1988: 19). Or put differently, government has to employ governmental technologies that can attach themselves to individuals’ self-technologies. Modern power, then, should not act directly upon people to force and control; it should rather shape and influence the ways in which people act upon themselves. This definition highlights a key observation that Foucault did on liberalism, namely that liberal government operates with a double-sided conception of the objects to be governed, that is, as both ontology *and* creation, as fundamentally self-governing *and* a product of

government. Liberalism never withdrew from governing but emphasised the need to govern cautiously, in accordance with natural mechanism, to secure the operations of the free market and so on. One might say, therefore, that there has always been a very active side to *laissez-faire* (Gordon, 1991: 19).

In liberal government, then, the individual is fundamentally autonomous and sovereign, but at the same time in need of guidance, improvement, discipline, development etc. How to govern individuals who are fundamentally self-governing has turned out to be an extremely 'fertile' problematic giving rise to a permanent injunction to find new practices of government. We thus witness a relentless creativity aimed at inventing new management technologies that can influence and direct individual's self-government without managing 'too much' or taking over responsibility.

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### Self-technologies

In a time when management has become afraid of 'governing too much' new technologies have to be invented that can facilitate employee's self-development at an arm's length. Miller & Rose, in an influential article (1992), suggested a similar diagnosis—namely that 'governing at a distance' has become a general strategy in advanced liberal states, as anti-professionalisation and anti-state critiques have made classic forms of expertise, authority and top-down government increasingly illegitimate. Instead, government has to be exercised by setting up programs, values and objectives that individuals can 'translate' into their own interest. Facilitating this 'translation' is indeed what the new management strategies and their self-technologies are about.

But how are 'self-technologies' defined more specifically? Foucault describes them as instruments and procedures that "...*permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality*" (1988: 18). Self-technologies, then, are means that individuals can use in order to transform themselves, to work upon themselves, and to isolate certain aspects in themselves as objects of knowledge and intervention. It should be stressed that such technologies are rarely people's own inventions. Most often, they are invented by various kinds of experts who in many cases also initiate and monitor their use. Examples of self-technologies are, for instance, diet programs, self-therapeutic exercises, or personal development plans.

Of particular importance for current management are technologies that make the employee speak. These are technologies that Townley (1993: 536) calls 'confessional' with a reference to Foucault. Making the employee speak about his personality, weak sides, needs, plans for development and so on, is a tricky exercise of power because it ties the individual to his own words. The individual can be held responsible for a truth that he has stated about who he is. Foucault (2000) terms this kind of exercising power 'pastoral', hereby drawing a line back to the technologies of confession and self-examination that were used in the Christian church to bring forward the truth about the inner qualities of every member of the congregation. For present purposes it is sufficient to note that there is indeed an affinity between these old, pastoral technologies and present management requirements that the employee speaks the truth about who he is.

With this background, let us take a look at two new technologies for managing employees that are indeed designed to make the speaker an authority of his own discourse. They are both instruments aimed at making the employee develop his personality in the light of organisational needs and challenges. The following case studies will thus demonstrate how the modern employee is brought to reflect upon his 'full personality' in relation to the organisation and its needs. This strategy requires different types of self-technology capable of bringing the work-related reflections into the private sphere and of making these reflections a continuous element in the employee's self-reflection. The self-technologies could also be termed 'pastoral' since their aim is to make the employee state the specific goals and needs for personal transformation. The case examples are taken from public organisations in Denmark<sup>2</sup>, a country in which the public sector prides itself of being a front runner with respect to implementing new management technologies. The cases below are not rare and arbitrary incidences, I contend, but they reflect a broader international trend in human resource management.

## The Home Assignment

As part of a broader re-organisation at the care centre, *Sølund*, in Copenhagen, a new competence review was introduced. One element in this review was a dialogue between manager and employee about the goals for personal development on the part of the employee. As a preparation for this dialogue, the employee was to make an interview with his spouse at home about his personal qualifications and qualities—a 'home assignment'. This technology is designed to open up the private, trusting space of the home to a reflection about competencies. Questions should include, among others: "In which areas could you imagine that I have good cooperative skills at my job?" and: "Which two things do you believe could be fruitful for me to improve and learn about in relation to cooperation. In this way, the technology makes use of a safe and intimate space to open up an observation of the personality of the employee as consisting of competencies. The home assignment gives the employee an outside look upon himself—an evaluating look that comes from a trusted person. It thus helps to initiate a dialogue about personality as competence, which can then be continued with the superior in a formal interview about the employee's development. The important point, however, is that the home interview with the spouse is fundamentally a preparation for the employee's self-interrogation about his strong and weak sides. It is a modern self-technology.

**Figure 1: The competence contract of Care centre Sølund**

<b>Contract agreement for competence development for Name:</b>	
I will particularly strive to improve: (list three things)	Comments (e.g. how these relate to the base values and competencies, is a helper required, time frame, etc.)
Suggestions for collective courses/instruction etc. for the entire department staff	Comments (e.g. how these relate to the base values and competencies, is a helper required, time frame, etc.)
I will work to obtain more knowledge/ better qualifications within the following areas.	Comments (e.g. how these relate to the base values and competencies, is a helper required, time frame, etc.)
Date: _____	
Signature: _____	

Source: Andersen, 2007: 8

We should notice that all the elements of the contract—the determination of goals to work for, the suggestions for courses and staff training and the promise to obtain better qualifications in specific areas—are all formulated by the employee. Hereby the employee can be held responsible for objectives, which he has himself stated. What the technology does, then, is to make the employee responsible for his own professional development. To develop competencies that correspond to organisational needs and goals becomes the responsibility of the individual employee, rather than the company, the director, or the HRM-manager.

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## Cards on the table

The second case example comes from the Danish municipality *Græsted-Gilleleje*, which has introduced a new concept for performance review, i.e. a conversation between manager and employee about personal talents and competencies. The method 'cards on the table' is a technology that prepares both manager and employee for the performance review by directing their attention toward specific objects. The method is as follows: a couple of weeks before the performance review, the manager gives the employee two sets of ten blank cards. The employee is instructed to carefully reflect upon his competencies. On this background, the employee is to notate the ten competencies that he or she considers a most appropriate characterisation of himself.

Subsequently these competencies are copied onto the other set of cards so that there are now two identical card decks. The employee is then to prioritise the cards with 1 as the highest and 10 as the lowest denomination. Then the employee turns over the unnumbered set of cards to the manager. The manager then evaluates the employee on the basis of the written competencies that he has been given by the employee. The manager now prioritises his set of cards in accordance with his view of the employee. This prioritisation is the manager's preparation for the review.

At the performance review, the two sets of cards are placed side by side on the table, which gives a clear visualization of the differences between the manager's and the employee's perception of the employee's competencies. The different views make the topic of conversation, and the core question is, of course, where is there an obvious need for learning? This method forces the employee to reflect on whether his self-perception is correct and reasonable.

Again, what is noteworthy about this technology is that it is the employee himself who states the competencies, which need to be developed. The employee is made the authority that defines which competencies are needed in the organisation. The 'card game', then, is an instrument that is designed to create a specific self-observation, namely the employee's observation of himself as a set of competencies. There is only a facilitator role ascribed to the manager, who is merely helping the employee in observing himself and to prioritise goals for personal development. Cards on the table, then, is an illustrative example of a technology designed for the work of the employee upon himself.

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## Breaking with classic management

The management of personality constitutes a fundamental break with classic management principles. This is especially the case when we compare with traditional ideals for managing public servants dating back to Max Weber's famous principles for the rational, modern bureaucracy (Weber, 1968). Here, the responsibility of the public servant was determined in the shape of explicitly stated duties and instructions. An official in a superior position had as responsibility to formulate duties and tasks and observe that these were being carried out in a disinterested fashion in accordance with the law. In the rational bureaucracy a strict line was to separate personal involvement and public office. The fundamental idea was to maintain a strict separation between the official role played by the servant and his personality – his emotions, feelings and interests. The bureaucratic organisation was to function in an uninterrupted fashion irrespectively of the concrete individuals who were in office, since specified expectations and duties were ascribed to each position in the organisation (Luhmann, 2003).

Today, on the contrary, the goal of management is to create a 'responsibility-seeking' employee and this breaks essentially with the classic principles of management. What is the responsibility of an employee has become something that the individual must seek out. Or put differently, the individual has today become responsible for finding out what the responsible thing is to do (Andersen, 2007: 8). The ideal is the 'responsibility-seeking employee' who does not await or receive his responsibility as something given. Instead he or she must constantly be on the search to find out what would be a way of assuming responsibility. As mentioned, the modern, participating employee is not one who carries out instructions or fulfils duties, but an employee who takes independent initiatives that no one has requested or even expected. The crucial thing is that these initiatives should come from the particular individual, from his unique personality.

If traditional bureaucratic management upheld a division between 'private' and 'official' matters at the work place, this distinction now seems to be blurring or even collapsing. As modern management has become about allowing the employee to make use of his 'full personality' at work, the private sphere is increasingly being defined as a positive and highly interesting element in management strategies. It has become an element to be explored, examined and made use of. This means that such things as health problems, alcohol related problems, and family problems have become relevant for the employing organisation. The logic is that a well-functioning private life constitutes an essential condition for personal involvement at work. Thus, making personal involvement a core employee qualification turns family life, health and emotional state into highly relevant domains of organisational interest.

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### Consequences of personality-management

The kind of management technologies described above are being implemented in public as well as private organisations, often under explicit or implicit pressure from state authorities or from mother-organisations in private companies. In 1994, the *Danish Ministry of Finance*, which supervises the strategies for managing employees in all public organisations, writes:

*"The employee must take responsibility for their own development. The employee should not leave it to management to handle their professional and personal development (...). Through continuous development and obtainment of qualifications it is possible for each employee to increase his or her own security both in relation to the workplace and in relation to the job market as such" (Danish Ministry of Finance, 1994: 18).*

The quote illustrates well the tendency in HRM where the new technologies seek to make the employee self-responsible for his learning. Thus, as we have seen above, when a manager initiates a dialogue with the employee this is not in order to point out the direction for the employee to develop. The manager has currently withdrawn from the scene to become a 'coach', a 'consultant' or a 'counsellor' that merely facilitates the employee's 'self-fulfilment'. What the organisation has to do is essentially to provide a framework within which the employees can demonstrate their initiatives and their responsible engagement. So, the days when pay and promotion followed formal achievements and curricula seem to be coming to an end—and this includes even public, 'bureaucratic' organisations. A manager in a public organisation in Denmark says about the decisive factors in an individualised pay-system:

*"What I say to my employees? Well a course certificate doesn't count – it isn't enough. No, the important thing for me is the way they commit to the work and this workplace. Does it matter to them? Do they seem engaged and involved? Are they taking responsibility for this organization? It's things like this that I notice" (Quote from: Rennison, 2007: 8).*

To be a 'quiet type' who just does the job, has become a less favourable position. Rather, one must be on the move and display visible signs of development.

The heavy emphasis on development, adaptability and 'on-going learning' means that employees should now look at themselves as 'unfinished' learning projects. The employee has to establish a development-oriented attitude towards himself. But what this development should consist of, more specifically, is something that the employees must find out by themselves. In this way, the employees are made responsible for developing themselves and for finding out how to remain attractive for their organisation. Management thus works by creating a permanent uncertainty about what the right thing is to do, about what the pre-emptive act might be (Rennison, 2007: 9).

Furthermore, the new management-trend turns the value of expert-knowledge and specialised competencies upside-down. Flexibility and the readiness to adapt to a constantly changing environment become key capacities, encapsulated by the popular dogma of 'life-long learning'. The result is that learning is disassociated from learning *something in particular*. In fact, knowing a lot about something may now imply incompetence in regards

to on-going competence development (Andersen, 2007: 23). Seeing oneself as incomplete and in a permanent learning process seems to be the most important qualification in current HRM-strategies.

But being ready to learn is not the only requirement; with the concept of self-responsibility the employee is constructed as his own educational planner. The employee must take up a position as both the object of learning and a competence strategist—he must be at the same time object and subject of pedagogical intervention. Or put differently, the employee must become both a student who learns and the educational planner who determines the learning content. However, by this token the employee is also made responsible for any errors in that might turn out to bear upon the curriculum (Andersen, 2007: 25).

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### Levelling of power or subtle dominance?

Does the proliferation of new self-technologies directed at the employee's personality mean that the employee is disciplined in still more subtle and inescapable ways? Or, conversely, do the new management technologies help the employee in fulfilling himself? Do we see 'liberating' tendencies where relations of power are becoming levelled or at least operated with less dominance? Or do we only witness a one-sided exercise of power that allows the organisation to raise demands at employee's personal development while at the same time precluding counterclaims from employees?

Admittedly, this paper does convey a sense of the expansionary tendency of discipline where power seems to install itself into every social domain and into every micro-relation, even those of family, partnerships and friends - which were once considered a space of privacy and genuine trust and emotions. However, this would be a too one-dimensional and claustrophobic reading of the current tendencies. We should not forget that power relations are unstable and reversible. Foucault speaks about the 'polyvalence' of the discourse emphasising that the discursive categories aimed at specific individuals can always be used as elements in strategies of counter-power (1981). The categories that are employed to label individuals as, say, 'gay people', 'consumers' of services, or 'learning subjects', can be used as a means of raising demands at the authorities who employed such categories in the first place. This was, for instance, the case for the gay movement where 'gay people' took the negative category and turned it into a positive group identity that could be used in a struggle for recognition and rights.

Following this line of thinking, the 'private life' of the employee could be seen as constituting a new speaking position in management relations. It is *also* a position from where employees can raise demands at employers—for example, demands for specific kinds of training, health counselling, or assistance with child raising problems. The employee can now give reasons and express needs with reference to a sphere to which the employee has privileged access (Andersen, 2007: 14). On the one hand, the private life of the employee is deemed relevant as a domain that the organisation can inquire about and include in management strategies. On the other hand, the private life has become a new platform from where the employee can speak without being considered out of line or irrelevant. The 'intimization' of the organisation-employee relationship allows power to operate in new ways and take new objects, but it concomitantly opens up new possibilities for counter-power.

From a Foucauldian perspective what is described is a particular 'dispositioning' of space and social relations but we do not hereby claim determination. The games of power are in principle always open for transformation, ruptures and reversals. It will be for the future to see how the new management-of-personality technologies are intertwined with specific organisational and professional rationalities and which forms of counter-power they will give rise to. So far, the new management strategies have had success in directing 'unspecified expectations' at the employees. Future studies must explore which counter-strategies and alternative self-technologies that employees will use to re-direct these expectations.



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<sup>1</sup> In 'Governmentality' (Foucault, 1991) Foucault introduced governmentality as a trivalent concept, designating 1) the emergence of new disciplines that took the population and the economy as their object: demography, public health, political economy etc.; 2) the historical process that led to government becoming the dominant mode of exercising power in modern societies; and 3) the transformation of the administrative state into a 'governmentalized', modern state (1991: 102-103).

<sup>2</sup> Here, the article draws upon a case analysis made by Andersen (2007: 6-10)