

ORGANIZATION AND THE ETHICS OF OFFICE

Sub-theme proposal to LAEMOS 2016

Submitted by:

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In the slipstream of the financial and sovereign economic crises, academics, commentators, and social movements have intensified protestation against the reigning neoliberal orthodoxy that throughout the last few decades has become pervasive as political ideology and governmental practice across large parts of the world (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Jones, 2012; Burgin, 2012). In organization studies, this critique has also been felt. One of its consequences has been an accentuation of the already prevalent injunction to explore alternative, marginalized, and radically different modes of organizing to those of ‘corporate capitalism’ (Perrow, 2002), ‘market managerialism’ (Parker, 2002), and related notions. If anything, it seems, the crises have prompted organization scholars of a critical bent to problematize and/or abandon all ‘conventional’ organization-centric theorizing and explore alternatives to the dominant tropes.

While such a strategy is in accord with much contemporary theorizing, an alternative approach to ‘subverting organizations’ is to reengage with some of the organizational practices, ideals, and principles of conduct that neoliberalism, and its associated theories and programs (such as, Agency Theory, Transaction Cost Economics, New Public Management, Governance, etc.), has sought to discredit and delegitimize. Here, the anti-neoliberal figure par excellence appears to be the professional, state-employed (or state-sponsored) office-holder not subject to market-like discipline. Such an office-holder, whether a soldier, a doctor, a state-bureaucrat, a teacher, a university professor, etc., has traditionally been associated with a ‘vocation’ and a commitment to values and norms of conduct that are incompatible with the tenets of ‘economic man’ (Marquand, 2004; Rohr, 1998). For that reason a number of reforms have been initiated to turn such ‘rent-seekers’ into responsive market-like agents. This sub-theme focuses upon tracing these reform processes and their effects on the role of professionals and *the ethics of office* in different organizational contexts. Further, focus here is on the links between the history of the ethics of office and the ethical compartments, tools and devices it has elaborated in various forms of organizational life.

The relevance of the session’s theme can be documented by the increasing number of well publicized political controversies and scandals concerning breaches of traditional public service virtues and responsibilities and discussions about a growing ‘mistrust’ of public servants and professionals in general. This is coupled with the growing ethical uncertainties related to often controversial managerial reforms of a wide range of public institutions. In this session we seek to explore the background to and the organizational consequences of these changes for the conduct, duties and responsibilities of public servants. We further seek to trace the historical roots, conceptual formulations and practical constellations of the ethics of office and conduct of office-holders as a form of moral agency that opposes more popular personalist and subject-centered

notions of personhood based on a dichotomy between moral autonomy and subordination to higher authority.

We welcome papers that deal with office-holding, the production of personhood and the changed roles of professionals in both public and private sector organizations.

Questions and themes that may be addressed include but are not limited to:

- Contemporary challenges for and reformulations of public service ethics
- Change and reform of public institutions and the effect on the conduct, duties and ethics of public servants and professional groups
- The relationship between personhood, moral autonomy and the role of state and governance in contemporary liberal democracies
- The connection between the practical conduct of public officers and the production of a well-functioning and responsible civil state
- Case-specific discussions about the practical conduct and case-based reasoning of office-holders
- The history and theory of the ethics of office

References

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