

# **Re-examining the Rhetoric of Public Management Reform from a Critical Management Studies Perspective**

## **Une exploration de la rhétorique de l'approche des études managerielles critiques aux réformes de l'administration publique**

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### Article abstract

Public management reform is mostly presented as a rational, technical and objective process in public administration discourse. Driven by the neo-liberal ideological assault on the welfare state and influenced by the “private is better” mantra, it has been claimed, especially by NPM/Managerialism advocates, that there are superior ideas, concepts and models out there which are value free and have universal validity and application. It is also claimed that the adoption and implementation of these ideals can secure the goals of efficiency, efficacy and economy in public organization. Based on an analysis of the critical management literature however, this paper (1) explores the extent to which concepts such as visionary and strategic leadership, teamwork, empowerment and improved organizational culture which are integral to the NPM/Managerialist claims are value free; (2) contests and interrogates their universality of adoption and application; and (3) explores and examines the relevance and theoretical contributions of critical management studies (hereafter CMS) to NPM in particular and public management reform in general.

# Re-examining the Rhetoric of Public Management Reform from a Critical Management Studies Perspective

By Joshua Jebuntie Zaato

Public management reform is mostly presented as a rational, technical and objective process in public administration discourse. Driven by the neo-liberal ideological assault on the welfare state and influenced by the “private is better” mantra, it has been claimed, especially by NPM/Managerialism advocates, that there are superior ideas, concepts and models out there which are value free and have universal validity and application. It is also claimed that the adoption and implementation of these ideals can secure the goals of efficiency, efficacy and economy in public organization. Based on an analysis of the critical management literature however, this paper (1) explores the extent to which concepts such as visionary and strategic leadership, teamwork, empowerment and improved organizational culture which are integral to the NPM/Managerialist claims are value free; (2) contests and interrogates their universality of adoption and application; and (3) explores and examines the relevance and theoretical contributions of critical management studies (hereafter CMS) to NPM in particular and public management reform in general.

## Une exploration de la rhétorique de l'approche des études managerielles critiques aux réformes de l'administration publique

Les réformes de la gestion publique sont plus souvent qu'autrement présentées comme des processus rationnels, techniques et objectifs dans le discours administratif. Sous l'influence de la pensée néolibérale et partant de l'idée selon laquelle la gestion privée est supérieure à sa contrepartie publique, il est parfois avancé, particulièrement par le managérialisme, que certains modèles, concepts et idées seraient à la fois universelles et intemporelles. Les notions d'efficacité, d'efficience et d'économie, les trois E, occupent une place centrale au sein de cette perspective. À partir d'une analyse critique de la littérature spécialisée, ce texte remet en question les prétentions d'universalité, d'intemporalité et de neutralité des concepts clés du nouveau management public/managérialisme, de même que de leur mise en œuvre au Canada et ailleurs dans le monde. Enfin, la dernière section explore l'intérêt et la pertinence de l'approche des études managerielles critiques (Critical Management Studies – CMS) pour l'administration publique, notamment eu égard aux réformes administratives.

### Introduction

Public management has been described variously by scholars, as an art, a science, a profession and a quasi-religious movement (Lynn, 1996; Hood, 2005). These conceptualizations and descriptions can be classified as conventional, mainstream or traditional definitions.<sup>1</sup> Hence,

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<sup>1</sup> By this reference is made to the dominant themes in most public management literature, theory and practice.

these descriptions represent conventional thinking, practice and research, and in the process, present public management as an objective, rational and scientific activity and discipline. These definitions and generally taken for granted classifications have however come under severe scrutiny and criticism from what might be termed unconventional scholars described as critical management scholars. Critical management scholars describe the conventional definition, ethos and locus of public management as unidirectional, one-sided and pro status-quo (Parker, 2002; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). Such scholars therefore call for a radical rethinking of the knowledge, practice and research of the discipline. In other words, these scholars advocate a re-focusing and re-characterization of the locus and ethos of public management to better reflect reality and embrace the normative and political aspects of public management. Specifically, these ideas by critical management scholars have become very relevant in the current mass movement known as the internationalization of public management reforms – a global movement towards creating public management convergences in both developed and developing countries by embracing dominant ideologies based on supposed tried and tested practical principles and ideas from the private sector.<sup>2</sup>

Critical management studies (hereafter, CMS) is one such field of study that is very critical of conventional public management reform discourse by challenging the “taken for granted” concepts, assumptions and ideas perpetuated as holy grail to reform and by implication improve efficiency and better organizational performance (Grey and Willmott, 2005). In this way, CMS seeks to contribute to the knowledge and understanding of public management reform by proposing an alternative way of practicing, studying and thinking about the process. With regards to public management reforms in particular, CMS advances a more critical way to re-examine the universalists’ concepts and principles that are inherent in the internationalization of public management (Minogue, 2001; Mathiasen, 2005) crusade and assault on the welfare state. These principles and concepts, which are heavily borrowed from the stables of the private sector, are propagated globally through the vehicles of policy transfer (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Mossberger and Wolman, 2003) and the new public management and managerialism (Peters, 1993; Shields and Evans, 1998) theoretical frameworks. The objectives are to create a universal public management uniformity based on scientific and positivist principles. However, the focus on objectivity and rationality to the neglect of norms, values cultural and historical antecedents seems narrow, considering public management reform is but an inherent political process and that all reforms are local. Therefore, neglecting or trivializing the cultural, social, normative and good governance values and ethics represents a major disconnect in the public management discourse.

This paper seeks to critically review and re-examine various managerial concepts and principles critical to NPM and public management reform such as teamwork, empowerment, the role of leadership and organizational structure/culture through the lens of CMS. However, I do not claim to make a thorough analysis of the various theoretical trajectories of CMS or even CMS as an academic discipline. On the contrary, the objective is to enrich from a theoretical perspective the debate among scholars and practitioners of NPM/Managerialism on the relevance of CMS to public management reform ideas and concepts. Consequently, the paper (1) explores the extent

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<sup>2</sup> Most of these ideas are propagated by international institutions like the OECD for most developed countries and transferred to developing countries using loans and donor conditionalities of the IMF/World Bank.

to which concepts such as leadership, teamwork/empowerment and organizational structure/culture are value free; (2) contests and interrogates their universality of adoption and implementation; and (3) explores and examines the relevance and theoretical contributions of critical management studies to NPM, in particular, and to public management reform in general. In short, the paper asks: does the fixation on rationality, positivism and objectivity to the neglect of norms, values and socio-cultural considerations create a good governance deficit in public management reforms? The paper argues that CMS provides a better alternative theoretical framework that integrates these normative aspects into the reform literature and discourse.

Consequently, this paper argues that CMS provides a better alternative theoretical framework for analyzing, examining and even interpreting the practices of public management reform. This framework appeals to the normative aspect of public management reforms, challenges and confronts “taken for granted” and grand narratives associated with public management reforms and in the process, widens the frontiers, boundaries and further illuminates our understanding and knowledge of public management reforms. In this regard, the paper critically examines the contribution of CMS to current practices and understanding of public management reforms. Such an approach is beneficial because, from the standpoint of CMS, the dominant paradigm of public management reform is informed by a technical and rationalist perspective which sees management practices as neutral, objective and impartial scientific techniques designed to enable the effective achievement of organizational goals (Adler, 2007; Parker, 2005). The implication is that management is expected to do away with any ‘humanness’ or normative calculations and be an instrument of scientific creation (Adler, 2002). CMS basically questions this uni-directional approach to reform and the reform process. Its motivating concern however is neither the personal failures of individual managers nor the poor management of specific organizations, but the social injustices and environmental destructiveness of the broader social and economic systems that managers and organizations serve and produce (Adler, 2002). In this regard, CMS addresses the often neglected but important unintended consequences of public management reforms especially on the vulnerable in society that are the victims of the massive assault on the welfare state and the neo-liberal ideology on reform. Thus, CMS is not focused on discourses that are concerned with the poor management or independent managers, but the systems of business that reproduce one sidedness, produced by economic behavior, guided by narrow goals and structures of the domination by organizations (Adler, 2002). That makes the concerns of CMS structural and not institutional.

The arguments in this paper will be organized and argued as follows. The first section will address and contextualize public management reform as a positivist and scientific approach spearheaded by the neo-liberal and capitalist concept and faith in the market. The second section will provide a working definition, history and core objectives of CMS. Next, the paper will argue that CMS has contributed massively to the practice, theory and discourse of public management reforms by focusing on three key thematic areas and dominant practices crucial to public management reforms. The final part will contain an analysis and a conclusion of the paper.

### ***Public management reform: a scientific, rational and technical activity?***

Lynn (1996, 2007) describes public management as a structure, a craft, an institution and a science. He argues that “from a structural perspective, public management involves two

interrelated elements: lawful delegation of authority and external control over the exercise of delegated authority” (p. 160). As a craft, public management is practiced by specific individuals, who can be referred to as public servants or bureaucrats in specific managerial positions. As an institution, it has rules, practices, bureaus, procedures and processes that are peculiar to it and define its *modus operandi*. Taken together, it can be defined as “the responsible and lawful exercise of discretion by public administrators” (p. 13). These public administrators or bureaucrats are therefore expected to master and perfect the art, craft and skills of their profession and apply them to their daily activities devoid of their personal preferences, ideas and beliefs. There should therefore be a clear separation of the personal lives of bureaucrats from their professional responsibilities. Hence, a mechanical and robotic process to administration is proposed and prescribed for bureaucrats.

For Henry (2007), public management has a focus and a locus that distinguishes it from any other management practice. This is because it has “a recurring locus (or the where) of public administration is government bureaucracy” (p. 26). The focus or the (what) on the other hand is the “body of knowledge and expertise of public administrators” (ibid). Fredrickson and Smith (2003) on the other hand emphasize the processes and procedures of public managers by describing public management “to mean the formal and informal processes of guiding human interaction towards public organizational objectives” (p. 98). These processes mean that there is an established and expected means of securing the ends of public administration. These processes are therefore expected to be upheld by the bureaucracy as a guiding map for their operations. What drives these processes and how they are expected to be interpreted however is not as neutral as the literature claims. This is because the reference to specialized skills, science, objectivity, art and structure presupposes a one-best-way of public management that must be adopted and practiced to achieve positive results. For instance, these concepts of objectivity, science, and art have influenced and informed current thinking and practice in public management reform and have given birth to NPM theory and ‘managerialism’ which are basically attempts to infuse private sector practices and principles into public management reform in particular (Hood, 1991; Dixon *et al.*, 1998; Shields and Evans, 1998; Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). In fact, because of this reference to a set of objective and scientific practices that public management adheres to, there are conscious attempts and efforts to link it to private management in order to better utilize these universally agreed upon and tested scientific and objective practices that are currently being used in the private sector (Allison, 2004; Boyne, 2002; Rainey, 2003). These attempts to innovate, restructure and transform public organizations to make them more efficient and effective is referred to in this paper as public management reform.

There is no universally agreed definition of public management reform because it means different things to different organizations in different places. Thus, it is better described than defined. For Pollitt and Boukaert (2000) however, public management reform “consists of deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public sector organizations with the objective of getting them to run better (p. 8). The assumption is that public organizations are over-bloated and extended, and have become inefficient and underperforming. Hence, there is the need to reform, transform, and revitalize them to make them perform better. Other authors have arrived at similar conclusions for public sector reform (Minoque, 1998; Frederickson, 1999; McCourt, 1998; Peters, 1993). In most of the literature therefore, the terms change, innovation, reorganization, reinvention, reengineering and corporatization have become synonymous with

reform. This approach to public sector reform can be referred to as the economic and financial-centred definition which is narrow in scope because it ignores the political, historical good governance and normative goals assumed and expected in public sector reform. Furthermore, it can be argued that there is an inherent reference to a set of objective, rational and scientific principles out there that are waiting to be discovered, adopted and implemented to begin the process of reform in these conceptualizations. It is mostly argued that the adoption of these principles such as performance management and measurement, contracting-out, management decentralization is the beginning of the public management reform revolution that will usher in a better performing public sector, based on the 3Es of economy, efficiency and effectiveness.

The attention to science and objectivity in public management reform however is not new because it has a foundational link in positivism and post-positivist philosophy, theory and ideology. For Dobuzinkis (1997), “the shift from positivism to post-positivism in public administration is ... [not] complete” (p. 289). In other words, public administration is a positivist-laden discipline that should transform from the normative aspect to a more rational and scientific approach. Positivism is “an umbrella for a range of approaches that were (or are still) characterized by their emphasis on objective, as opposed to normative analysis” (Ibid, p. 289). Positivism is therefore at the heart of public management reform and the emphasis on objectivity is an emphasis on a scientific method. As Dobuzinkis (1997) argues, “most nineteenth century social philosophers shared the view that social realities can be known objectively; that is separating facts from values is both possible and desirable (p. 299). Thus, in order to better secure these social realities and objectives, public managers should seek and pursue objectivity and shun values and ethics. There is therefore an objective, factual and one best way that is not only possible and desirable, but is waiting to be discovered and implemented.

This emphasis on positivism has had a phenomenal effect on public management theory, practice and research. For instance, classical public administration theorists like Henry Fayol’s (1949) *General Principles of Management*, Luther Gullicks (1937) *Notes on the Theory of Organization*, Herbert Simon’s (1946) *Proverbs of Administration* and Fredrick Taylor’s (1911) *Principles of Scientific Management*, which are the guiding classical theories of the discipline, were all based on a scientific and objective analysis of public administration. In their attempt to separate norms and values from the study of public administration, they sought answers in science. As a result, classical concepts such as ‘scientific management,’ ‘PODSCORB’ and ‘total quality management’ (TQM), which were the early concepts and ideas aimed at reforming the Weberian ideal bureaucracy, all had an aura of objectivity, rationality and neutrality to them.

Perhaps, it can be argued that right from the classical period to present day, NPM and reinventing government movement, public administration and public management reform have been heavily skewed towards this scientific approach. In practice, research and knowledge, public administration practitioners have been taught to refer to science, and disregard or trivialize historical, social, and cultural as normative and out of the jurisdiction of the manager. This emphasis on science, objectivity and technicality de-emphasizes the human, normative, values and ethical aspects that are core to the profession and institution of the public sector (Kernaghan and Langford, 1990). Such a process further sidelines and marginalizes historical, cultural, social and even political aspects and antecedents of management because they are value laden. However, this paper, like CMS, postulates that there is more to knowledge, practice and research in public management reform than science, objectivity and positivism. This position is further

elaborated by a critical analysis of CMS, which questions the very essence and concept of rationality and objectivity.

### ***A brief introduction to CMS***

Contrary to public management scholarly work that is heavily based on, and influenced by the scientific process, CMS completely rejects and questions this fixation on the positivist approach, describing it as oppressive because it ignores the historical, social, political and cultural aspects of management (Adler *et al.*, 2006; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992 and 2002; Reedy, 2008). Hence it can be argued that “CMS tends to see itself as a transformative force through its opposition to mainstream management theory and practice” (Reedy, 2008: 57). Thus, instead of seeking some established principles and ideas that are objective and rational to enable public sector reform, CMS appeals to reformers to look within the particular political, social, cultural and economic system within which they operate and draw lessons and experiences from them to advance their reform agenda. Therefore, instead of the fixation on efficiency, economy and efficacy, other normative goals as the public interest, accountability, transparency and the values and ethics of the public sector, which are not necessarily rational, are also crucial in public management reform.

For Fournier and Grey (2000), CMS is organized around three key components. These are de-naturalization, which “refers to what is crucial to any opposition politics” (p. 5). In other words, this refers to contesting any given and any “taken for granted” generalization about public management reform in general. It refers to questioning any concept that is an established norm and subjecting it to critical scrutiny and analysis. In fact, it challenges the *status-quo*. For instance, concepts and ideas such as the new public management (NPM), which seeks to run government like a business, and its predecessor, total quality management (TQM), which is fixated on efficiency, have all been accepted as vital for public management reform at one time or the other among practitioners and scholars in the discipline. They are therefore adopted and implemented so religiously as if the very existence of the public sector depended upon them. Public sector managers were then made servants of these concepts in both developed and developing countries because they came from the experts, the establishment and the mainstream literature. They were then adopted and implemented hook, line and sinker sometimes with little or no alteration or modification at all and expected to replicate results. CMS questions this very habit of clinging to new and fashionable concepts just because they are from the mainstream without subjecting them to any critical scrutiny and analysis to determine biases, dominant preferences and idiosyncrasies of the drivers and promoters of these concepts. CMS thus “challenges these kinds of assertions, identifying them as a manifestation of a particular capitalist and possessive individualist ideology and thereby endeavors to de-naturalize them by recalling their context dependent” (Alvesson *et al.*, 2009: 10). Such a critical approach is particularly crucial in the adoption and implementation of reform models by developing countries from developed economies considering the economic, social and political differences of the originating countries. One can argue that the poor performance of the public sector in most developing countries after years of structural adjustment programs is because of this uncritical adoption and implementation of dominant policies and ideas.

The second key component of CMS is anti-performity, which “denies that social relations should be thought of as exclusively instrumental in terms of maximizing output from a given input” (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 5). The main objective of public management reform is the

maximization of results or performance. Thus, inputs in the form of resources such as funds, time and human resources are all geared towards maximizing outputs. Output maximization thus become the sole yardstick of measuring or determining the success or otherwise of public sector reforms. Such an approach is narrow and myopic because it mainly ignores the unintended consequences of these processes, practices and concepts. Thus, CMS challenges the exclusive focus of management for output maximization without recourse to the means of achieving organizational ends by contesting the monocular focus of productivity (Ibid.) in public management which occludes social, political, cultural and historical antecedents as factors that contribute to and can inhibit productivity. For Alvesson *et al.* (2009), anti-performativity does not mean a rejection of any notion of ends or results. On the contrary, it is a technical term used to “identify social relations in which the dominance of a means-ends calculus acts to exclude critical reflections on the question of ends” (p. 10). Such a critical approach to public management reform in particular is important because in most cases, the focus on efficiency, efficacy and economy marginalizes “broader and deeper ethical and political issues and questions such as the distribution of life chances within corporations or the absence of any meaningful democracy in the working life [which] are either ignored or at best marginally accommodated” (p. 10). For instance, public administration literature and research on reform models and concepts such as privatization, public-private partnerships and contracting-out mostly highlights their superiority over public ownership and provision. However, they ignore the wealth and income redistributive aspects of these reforms which tend to empower and enrich a few elites and privilege segments of the society by consolidating wealth within the upper echelons of society. This income and wealth redistributive process thus raises ethical, social, cultural and political questions. Unfortunately, none of them gets the needed attention in the literature as they are buried under the weight of the efficiency and productivity calculus.

Finally, reflexivity, a recognition that accounts and reports of organizations are produced, refereed by researchers and embedded in certain traditions, e.g. positivism, using certain traditional and dominant methodologies (Fournier and Grey, 2000: 6) is the third key component of CMS. Reflexivity therefore proceeds from the understanding that objectivity is an ideal sought and desired but not real. As such, all knowledge and practice about management in general and public management reform in particular is moderated through the viewpoint of the author (Alvesson *et al.*, 2009). Through reflexivity, “CMS presents a methodological and epistemological challenge to the objectivism and scientism of mainstream research where there is an assumption and/or masquerade of neutrality and universality” (Reedy, 2008: 6). As such, concepts such as deregulation, privatization and marketization which have been propagated as antidotes to the woes of the dysfunctional bureaucratic state (Lane, 1997) and presented as objective and rational should be questioned and challenged. Instead of upholding them as best practices, they should be seen as the products of the ideologies, perceptions, traditions and philosophies of their authors and their specific political and social systems, not universal antidotes for global challenges.

Taken together, denaturalization, antiperformity and reflexivity provides an alternative to the dominant discourses and grand narratives that focus exclusively on financial and economic performance in public management reform by appealing to the inherent and, by implication, political nature of reform which is contingent and situational specific. From this perspective, the idea of universal principles and ideas are none existent. After all, every reform process and experience is unique and local, not universal. There is therefore the need for these concepts to be



challenged and creatively adapted to suit the specific needs and circumstances of implementing jurisdictions and only implemented when it is absolutely necessary. These stands should not come as a surprise because ideologically, CMS is opposed to the dominant and prevailing ideological leaning of conventional management which is mainly concerned with “objectivity, scientific, research-based conceptualization of practical managerial problem-solving” (Anthony, 2005). As such, CMS is against global capitalism, and neo-liberalism (Adler, 2007; Parker, 2002; Grey and Fournier, 2000). From this perspective, CMS has political connotations and interests that are different from the neo-liberal prescriptions that formed and influenced the waves of reform that was embarked upon by most developed countries in the early to mid 1980s. Also, the emphasis on historical, social, cultural and political considerations in management all point to the fact that CMS is fundamentally pro-Marxist (Adler *et al.*, 2007).

As an academic discipline, CMS has roots in business schools of universities (Grey and Willmott, 2005) where it is highly critical of the *status-quo* and orthodoxy. This is because for CMS scholarly research, there is more to management than the fixed and standardized scientific approaches prescribed in business journals that preach a one-size-fits-all approach to all business problems. Hence, “since CMS departs from the mainstream scientific conception of knowledge, it can offer a different approach to students of management” (Ibid., p. 11) in business schools. This alternative approach is one that recognizes that the issues of management extend beyond standard textbook recommendations. Hence, for the managers that seek knowledge different from the orthodox textbook recommendations on management, and for those concerned about social injustices, environmental degradation, economic and political power imbalances and the processes that produce them, “CMS commands an approach that is politically as well as epistemologically differentiated from the mainstream” (Grey and Willmott, 2004: 11). Recent world events in the wake of the current recession amply demonstrate and gives credence to this thought and approach to management which is completely fixated on profit maximization by any means possible.

The significance of this critical and alternative approach is further emphasizes by the near collapse of the global economic and financial system which questioned the logic of unbridle capitalism and narrow focus on profit maximization. For both public and private management therefore, CMS provides an alternative approach to results, performance and management that enables the desire for massive profits and results to be tempered with social justice and equity. In this way, CMS provides an all encompassing pluralist view of studies and knowledge on public management reforms in democratic states. Contrary to mainstream public management reform literature and discourse therefore, CMS identifies management as a social practice embedded with historical and cultural relations of power. It acknowledges that all management knowledge is politically, socially and culturally constructed. Thus, rather than representing a disintegrated truth based on a non-existent focus on rationality and objectivity, CMS believes that management, performance and results are situational and carry bias. Its theory therefore legitimizes some practices and marginalizes others in ways that its rhetoric provides not just a legitimization, but the reason for what it is that some people are able to do and others can’t (Willmott, 2005; Thompson, 2005; Alvesson and Deetz, 2005).

In the next section, the analysis will zoom in on the contributions of CMS to public management reforms by focusing on three key components that are integral to the process. These issues are leadership, organizational structural/cultural changes and empowerment/teamwork.

## ***Contesting mainstream leadership concepts in public management reforms***

There are three main schools of thought in mainstream public management on leadership. These are transformative, charismatic and entrepreneurial leadership (Van Wart, 2003). The transformative school is focused on the vision and organizational ability of leaders (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985; Bennis and Nanus, 1985). The overarching import of this school of thought is that leaders should be objective, have clear vision, and leadership skills. The charismatic school on the other hand focuses on the ability to motivate people and inspire the ruled (House, 1977; Meindle, 1990). The third and final school of thought on leadership is the entrepreneurial school that urges leaders to make practical processes and cultural changes that have the potential of dramatically improving productivity (Van Mart, 2003; Champy, 1995; Peters and Auatin, 1985). A common thread that runs through all these schools is that leadership entails certain traits, qualities and attributes that are visible, objective and empirical. For Van Mart (2003), the role of leadership is to “make sure that technical problems are handled correctively ... [since] these and other technical aspects of production are” (p. 220) the focus of leadership. For the purposes of this paper, the terms leaders, leadership, managers and management will be used synonymously to mean a higher authority in an organization with the power to exert an amount of control and lead in the operations and management of that organizations.

As Perry and Bryman (2006) argue, there are five approaches of leadership theory and research. These are: the trait approach, the style approach, contingency approach, the new leadership approach and the post-charismatic and post-transformational approaches. The trait approach links leadership abilities to birth; the style approach emphasizes training (House and Aditya, 1997; Perry and Bryman, 2006). Contingency approach on the other hand is situational, and contingent upon the need to lead. Hence, it emphasizes that leadership is dependent upon situational variables (Fiedler, 1967; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967). Finally, new leadership approach, post-charismatic and transformative approaches all focus on leadership as managers of meaning, with the ability to develop visions and manage followers. Such characterizations of leadership emphasize certain specific qualities that are objective and based on scientific principles. As a scientific practice, leadership should challenge the process, inspire a vision, enable others to act, model the way and encourage hearts (Kouzes and Posner, 1995). To practice these adequately, leaders must search out, experiment, envision, enlist, foster, strengthen, recognize and achieve (Kernaghan *et al.*, 2000). All these processes and practices point to a textbook analysis and prescription of the scientific method and processes which are ably captured in the attributes of a leader. A leader is expected to have skills to plan strategically, be a team player, exercise good objective judgment, set clear goals and be results-oriented among other things (Kernaghan *et al.*, 2000). It can be argued that these attributes as explained above conform to the scientific process of research and represents the conventional and dominant orthodoxy.

However, this labeling of leadership in the mainstream management discourse as one with specialized scientific skills, who can make objective decisions based on sound practical and technical knowledge is fundamentally rejected by CMS because it is problematic. As Smith (2008) argues, CMS is “concerned that management (leadership) is not a neutral, objective tool” (p. 17). This is because it is shaped by various environmental, social, cultural and political conditions that are not necessarily technical, objective and scientific as the mainstream literature

argues. Hopfl (2005) is specifically suspicious of the ability of charismatic leaders (in particular) to “produce powerful correspondences between behaviors and experience” (p. 276). He argues that it is not the skills, objectivity and technicality of leaders that gets results, arguing that both positive and negative relationships exist between leaders and followers. He stresses that it is the “co-existence of commitment, performance activities, fantasies and a whole repertoire of behaviors mediating between the organization and the individual is the desirable state of affairs” (p. 277) and not the individual scientific skills and technocratic abilities of leaders as argued in conventional public management parlance. In fact, CMS questions the taken for granted mainstream assumption that “someone (a leader) has to be in charge, and that managers are experts by virtue of their education and training” (Adler *et al.*, 2007: 9). CMS argues that these mainstream conventions represent a conscious effort to delimit the humanness in leadership by positioning it as a special skill, which is based on objectivity and sound technical judgment and gained through specialized training and education. “CMS questions the self-evidence of these kinds of assumptions [because] such patterns of behavior are neither natural nor eternal” (Adler *et al.*, 2007: 9).

Thus by questioning the taken for granted assumptions, CMS expands and extends the horizons of knowledge and practice in the discipline. In the first place, CMS proposes an alternative way of examining leadership in public organizations. Thus, instead of seeing leadership as a mechanical, objective and scientific activity steeped in positivism, leadership should be seen as being influenced by a collection of historical, social, cultural and political factors. In this way, CMS has contributed to the literature and knowledge by introducing a different aspect to, and way of, viewing leadership. If leadership is viewed in this way, it will be more holistic and encompassing, thereby being constantly in touch with the led. For instance, most of the transformative public sector reforms carried out in the UK, US and Canada were mainly driven by politicians based on their personal ideas and party ideologies of what form and structure reform should take (Savoie, 1994; Harley, 2005). It is also ideological inclinations, not any special leadership traits that basically differentiate reform efforts, models and ideas in the Scandinavian social democratic countries from the more capitalist-oriented western European countries. This then means that leadership in the reform process cannot be divorced from the contingencies of politics, social and cultural variables in any system. Thus, instead of portraying leadership as a set of superior qualities waiting to be found, it should be seen as the accumulation of the experiences, values, practices and norms that govern and inform organizational behaviors in any political and economic system. It is when leadership is viewed like this that reforms will be adapted to fit and ameliorate the unintended consequences of reform. Apart from leadership, CMS has also greatly contributed to knowledge on organizational structure and culture. In the ensuing section, the paper makes a compelling case for a more people, social, political and cultural oriented management approach as opposed to the current technical and specialized approach adopted and advocated in mainstream public management literature.

### ***Organizational culture and structure in public management reform***

The Weberian model of bureaucracy is one that is based on hierarchy, official jurisdictions, principles of office hierarchy and graded offices, based on command and control, rules and laws (Weber, 1964). This structure of bureaucracy of organizations has stuck to-date and represents the *status-quo* and conventional way of organizational structure in both private and public organizations. The purpose of this structure was to maximize efficiency and efficacy in the

organization (Weber, 1964), but has, arguably, been used as a structure and system of oppression and domination. Though there have been attempts to replace the bureaucratic model with the post bureaucratic model (Kernaghan *et al.*, 2000), that has yet to happen. This is because of the complexities, contradictory and sometimes ambiguous roles and responsibilities that governments undertake. The bureaucratic model has therefore proved to be better suited to play these roles better than any other proposed model. Eventhough there are conscious attempts in current public sector reforms to embrace horizontality, the vast majority of government bureaus are still structured around the Weberian model.

For Fayol (1949), work in an organization must be arranged vertically based on his fourteen principles of management. By principles of management, Fayol was referring to “a certain number of...laws and rules” which the “soundness and good working order of the body corporate depend on” (p. 48). These principles, laws and rules connote a value-free approach to management and have informed how modern organizations are structured and operated. They all point to a process and a body of knowledge that is scientific, objective, technical and capable of being applicable to all organizations. In as far as modern knowledge and understanding of public management is influenced by these classics, it can be argued that modern organizational structure is still influenced by this addiction to a process and structure that is vertical, scientific, objective, value free and hierarchical. Hierarchy then becomes the preferred vehicle to manage and achieve organizational goals.

However, there is a copious amount of literature on CMS which sees the formal organization with its laws, processes and practices as oppressive, domineering and therefore unproductive because, eventhough they can achieve efficiency in the performance of routine jobs, they fail badly when faced with unexpected difficulties and need to innovate (Adler, 2005; Scott, 1992; Daft, 1998). By implication, such established systems represent and entrench routine and anticipated job classifications. However, when there is the need for change, innovation and a demand to try something new and adopt a new approach, hierarchical organizations and structures are lethargic and not dynamic. As Adler (2005) argues, “the vertical differentiation of hierarchy is effective for routine tasks, facilitating downward communication of explicit knowledge and commands, but less effective when tasks are non-routine” (p. 172). The effectiveness or otherwise of verticality is particularly evident in the case of policy transfer from developed economies and institutions to developing countries and economies. Most of these developing countries, in their attempt to reform and restructure their public sectors, borrow ideas and institutions from the developed economies mostly wholesale but lack the needed skills and capacity to adopt and implement these policy convergences prescribed for or imposed on them by international organizations such as the IMF/World Bank and OECD (Common, 1998; Minogue, 2001). Therefore, a new kind of organizational structure and culture, one that is flexible, contingent upon local environmental variables and malleable is better suited than established and mainstream ones.

This thinking finds support with the literature that questions the rationale for and ability of developing countries, in particular, to adopt and implement these dominant reform models, institutions, ideas and practices. Schick (1998) for instance, argues that despite the need and desire to re-invent and accelerate public sector reforms, developing countries should not attempt to adopt models from the developed world because these models “are beyond their reach or do not fit their current needs” (p. 124). Specifically, Schick (1998) has advised developing countries

to stay away from the New Zealand style reform models because of the dominance of informal markets and processes inherent in the public sector of developing countries.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have reached similar conclusions with regards to the suitability and applicability of public sector reform models transferred from developed countries to developing countries (Caiden, 1999; Minogue, 2001; Polidano, 2001; McCourt, 2001).

Despite this caution, developing countries and their developed counterparts are still embracing these reforms because of the expected benefits. The expectation is that through these reform efforts “government is being transformed and reinvented, bureaucratic centralism is being abandoned, the welfare state is being downsized, the public sector is being reduced, public organizations are being reengineered, and public management is being reinvigorated” (Caiden, 1999: 815). The objective is to make way for “quasi-markets and quangos, flattened hierarchies and continues improvement, competitive tendering and subsidiarity” (Lynn, 2006: 2) through partnerships between the public and private sectors. This has led to the transfer of policies such as privatization, contracting-out, performance management and measurement, public-private partnerships, performance and management contracts which have been tested in the policy laboratories of developed countries to be transferred to developing countries mostly on a one best way platform. However, not only does this policy reform movement signal the emergence and domination of a centralized and globalized model of public management, but also the clear tendency to transfer administrative reform models to developing countries on a one-size-fits-all basis with little or no regard to their suitability to the individual implementing countries. Furthermore, these reform models often make unrealistic assumptions about the suitability, adaptability and capacity of a public organization, in general, and those in developing countries, in particular, to change in response to these hierarchical directives and policy impositions from external powers.

A key component of the environmental variables to be considered in the transfer of reform models from developed economies and industrialized institutions to developing countries for instance is cultural differences between the two systems (Wilkins and Ouchi, 1983). With regards to culture, two main dimensions can be identified. These are social and organizational culture. Social culture can be referred to as the shared values, traditions, beliefs and norms unique to a group of people and have been passed on from generation to generation through socialization (Schen, 2004). Organizational culture, on the other hand, can be described as the norms, formal rules and procedures, rituals, acceptable practices and the espoused values of an organization (Schen, 2004; Martin, 1992). As Minogue (2001) argue, “cultures are unique and distinctive, and in various ways resistant to the application of one best model or application” (p. 34). Also, in a study of NPM style reforms in post-apartheid South Africa, Pillay (2008) argues that both the national and organizational cultures of South Africa were not conducive for NPM style reforms.

CMS’s strategic contribution to organizational structure and culture in this direction is the rejection of the *status-quo* and orthodoxy by embracing horizontality, the creative adoption and adaptation of policies and programs as an impetus for innovation, managing change and risks in organizations. In this way, CMS introduces dynamism into an organization because if

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<sup>3</sup> New Zealand is a global leader in public sector reform and has almost perfected the concept of contractualism which gives public managers broader discretion and independence closely associated with performance targets.

organizations can embrace horizontality, they will be in a better position to maximize the full potential of their human resources. Having examined organizational structure in this section, the next segment will focus on the rationale behind teamwork and empowerment in organizations.

### ***Teamwork and empowerment: avenues of exploitation or enhanced productivity?***

Empowerment and teamwork are key concepts in the NPM literature that are integral in the transition and move from the bureaucratic to the post-bureaucratic organization. That makes both concepts very important in the public management reform movement since that is the main objective of the move from the bureaucratic to the post-bureaucratic model. Empowerment is generally described as a “growing international phenomena involving demands by people all over the world to be recognized, consulted and valued” (Kernaghan *et al.*, 2000: 158). With regards to public management reform in particular, “it is also closely linked to such other characteristics of the post-bureaucratic model as quality service, shared values, participatory decision making, innovation and risk sharing and accountability for results” (Kernaghan *et al.*, 2000: 178). Empowerment is therefore crucial to the re-inventing government movement that is aimed at creating an entrepreneurial government that empowers managers to be free to manage (Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). Teamwork on the other hand is described as a collection of small groups of people entrusted with working together on particular assignments towards achieving organizational goals. The objective is that with people working closely together, ideas can easily be shared and solutions found at the micro-level. “Teams are now also viewed as an effective means of promoting high performance by both individuals and organizations [and] are closely linked to such approaches as organizational learning and re-engineering” (Kernaghan *et al.*, 2000: 165). There is therefore a connection between empowerment and teamwork in the public management reform movement. Both concepts are seen as important in unleashing the entrepreneurial spirit in mid to front level employees to contribute significantly to organizational ends. Considered a maligned and ignored constituency in the *status-quo*, empowerment and teamwork are seen as the best way to tap into the reservoir of experience that these constituencies possess. They are therefore increasingly propagated as key to organizational reforms, restructuring and performances.

Despite this general rosy picture of teamwork and empowerment advocated in mainstream literature, “critical research has shown how teamwork, when indeed management corrals it towards business goals, can result in oppressive internationalization of business values and goals by team members” (Adler *et al.*, 2007: 4). From this perspective, teamwork ceases to be a melting pot of differences, divisions, suspicions and hate but sources of exploitation and oppression by management. Teams can also be perceived as agents of conformity used by management to perpetuate a way of thinking and behavior in organizations by suppressing dissent and promoting a one-best way mentality and approach. This is because the very essence of teamwork is to bury or put aside individual convictions and ideas and embrace the position of the organization. It is possible that dissenting voices may get lost in team deliberations and debates, making way for either louder or dominant voices to have their way. The rest of the team then have no choice but conform. This “resulting conformism suppresses democratic dialogue about the appropriateness of... underlying values and goals. Critical studies show how [these] routinely reinforces established class and authority hierarchies as well as oppressive gender and

ethnic relations” (Adler *et al.*, 2007: 4) finally emerge as dominant discourses, ideas and practices.

There is therefore a large body of literature in CMS research that views both the practice of team work and the mainstream theory that inform it as problematic, oppressive and counterproductive (Adler *et al.*, 2007; Batt and Doellgast, 2006; Barker, 1993). Perhaps, teamwork is a regulatory mechanism employed by management to monitor and regulate worker behavior and thinking in organizations. Maybe, teamwork is also used as a divisionary tactic to break the ranks of workers. Still, team leaders it can be argued mostly represent the ‘ears’ and ‘eyes’ of management in teams looking out for non-conformist. All these measures and perceptions, it can be argued, are domineering and counterproductive especially in democratic dispensations that are expected to cherish diversity and freedom of thought. By researching on teamwork, CMS exposes the exploitation of teams by management.

Also, the value of empowerment and its adaptability is mostly ignored. It is mostly presented as an antidote to liberating front line workers and enabling them to play a key role in the organizational decision-making process and more importantly deliver public services more effectively and efficiently. But the means and capacity by organizations to empower management are not readily available. Pollitt and Bouckaert (2000) for instance have pointed out the potential and real contradictions that this concept entails in the public management reform literature. This is because of the power imbalances between politicians and how they are expected to relate to and work with empowered front line workers. There is also the issue of where the buck stops. If politicians are expected to take the blame and praise for whatever goes on in their organizations, how much of this power will they be prepared to release and how do they get to be blamed for the actions of an empowered staff member. Other scholars such as Hood (1998) have also questioned this concept pointing out the difficulties that it entails especially with implementation. Taken together therefore, empowerment and teams are ideals and establishment or conventional mainstream practices that are being propagated within the public management reform literature. However, the extent to which they actually empowering, consulting, involving and engaging their targeted constituencies is questioned. They are therefore nothing but the perpetuation of dominant ideas that are recycled and spread around in different garments.

## **Conclusion**

The main thrust of this paper is that CMS provides an alternative framework for analyzing, examining and studying the practices of public management reform and as such has widened the frontiers and boundaries of knowledge and illuminates our understanding of public management reforms. By critically analyzing concepts like leadership, organizational structure and culture, and teamwork and empowerment, the paper has established major contributions to generally taken-for-granted concepts in public management literature and research. By questioning these concepts, CMS expands knowledge and understanding of public management reform and provides alternative frameworks for practicing, studying and research on public management reforms in a very radical and revolutionary way.

CMS also provides a critical approach to management attempts to reflect the social, cultural and political dimensions of managerial practices and organizational systems. For instance, there is an increasing awareness in the literature that speaks about a new public service (Denhardt and

Denhardt, 2002) that calls on public administrators to serve instead of steer by refocusing on public interest, the ideals of democratic governance, renewed civic engagement by interacting with politicians in order to bring about positive changes to governance and communities. CMS contributes to this bulging literature by the examination of competing discourses and questioning of power and the control of knowledge mostly by neo-liberal ideologues with their private sector partners who constantly portray the private sector as superior to the public sector. Specifically, CMS involves questioning the ideological assumptions underpinning theory and practice of the internationalization of public management reform models based on unbridled capitalism and free market mechanisms (Adler, 2005). As a critical discipline, CMS asks stimulating questions of social, organizational and political processes within organizations and relates practice to broader economic, political, historical and social context. This means considering organizational ends as well as means. It involves an appreciation of management as a social, political and moral practice rather than a set of techniques and practices to be learnt and applied. Hence, it can be concluded that CMS has had a phenomenal impact on public management reform. By questioning conventions, and mainstream knowledge, CMS had broadened the debate on public management reforms in a very significant and positive way.

In conclusion, CMS contributes to the theory and research on public management reform by basically questioning and re-evaluating grand narratives, conventional wisdom and acceptable practices and ideas. In this way, public management scholars and practitioners are challenged to seek new ways of doing research and delivering public services. More significantly, CMS is a catalyst that can potentially lead to a fundamental rethinking of the subject of reform within the broader concept of democratic governance. After all, reform must be implemented within a political system and must thus budget for normative concepts such as the public interest, accountability, transparency, equity and social justice. But more importantly, public management reforms are not free from the social, cultural, political, economic and financial systems in which they are being implemented. The extent and degree to which these reforms are thus adapted to fit these contingent environmental variables will go in a long way to determine the success or otherwise. CMS provides both a theoretical lens and a practical approach to these issues.

For most developing countries in particular that uncritically borrow reform models, ideas and institutions from developed economies and institutions, CMS provides a methodological, theoretical and even practical resource to govern the process. Basically, there is no one-size-fits-all solution out there waiting to be discovered and implemented. Thus, government in developing countries should look within for answers to their public administration problems and should adopt international models only when it is extremely important. Even then, they should be creatively adapted to fit the peculiar social, economic, political, cultural and economic systems of their countries. It is in this way that the aims and objectives of the reforms can be secured.

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