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Renewing the public domain: Can a more socially embedded bureaucracy help?

A TWP Think Piece

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About this publication

This is one of a pair of papers that explore whether and how 'social embeddedness' might help improve public-sector effectiveness, in a way that helps more broadly to renew the legitimacy of the public domain. This TWP Think Piece provides a summary overview of the companion TWP Working Paper, which lays out the theoretical and empirical arguments for micro-foundations.

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1. Why a 'Socially Embedded Bureaucracy'?

Changing times bring changing questions. In the two decades following the fall of the Berlin Wall, 'state building' became a principal focus of governance reform (Fukuyama, 2004). I was part of the team that drafted the 1997 World Development Report, *The State in a Changing World* (World Bank, 1997), a document which signalled a decisive broadening of the World Bank's approach to development from a narrow preoccupation with economic concerns to a broader engagement with its governance dimensions. Back then, the agenda on how to move forward seemed straightforward; and its logic was hierarchical and normative, rooted in some fundamental assumptions. Politicians were intended to govern the public bureaucracy, within a framework of rules and a variety of checks and balances. The bureaucracy, in turn, was meant to be insulated in its day-to-day work from direct political pressure, and from other pressures from non-governmental actors. Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, practical challenges associated with implementing this mainstream agenda became increasingly evident; even if, overall, things seemed broadly on track. The subsequent 15 years, however, have witnessed a dramatic collapse of trust in government and of civic perceptions regarding the legitimacy of the public domain.

To illustrate what is at stake, consider the example of South Africa. The country's transition in the 1990s from apartheid to constitutional democracy offered special inspiration, even during a generally hopeful decade marked by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the perceived triumph of democracy and open markets at the global level. In South Africa, once the new political and institutional arrangements had consolidated by the mid-2000s, trust was sky-high. In 2006, up to 70% of the population trusted both the president (Thabo Mbeki) and the governing African National Congress (ANC), and 71% perceived government to be managing the economy well.[1] By 2012 (coincidentally the year I left the World Bank to become the founding Academic Director of the Nelson Mandela School of Public Governance at the University of Cape Town), the rose began to lose its bloom. That year, trust in both the president (by then Jacob Zuma) and the still-ruling ANC remained high at 62%, but less than half of the population (47%) felt that the economy was being well managed. Subsequently, confidence in the quality of economic management continuing to decline dramatically – down to 39% in 2018 (the year Cyril Ramaphosa succeeded Jacob Zuma as president) and a disastrous 19% in 2023.[2]

This story of profound popular discontent with the workings of the (democratic) state does not haunt South Africa alone. A turn from high levels of trust and legitimacy to disillusion has played out across regions and continents. In the last third of the twentieth century, trust in government and public institutions eroded among almost all high-income democracies in the Global North (Dalton, 2005), with the trend especially stark in the USA. In the 1960s and 1970s, trust in government in the USA was

[1] The South African trust data are from https://www.afrobarometer.org/

[2] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/

in the 60–75% range; in the decade prior to the 2007/8 global financial crisis, it ranged between 30% and 50%; since then, it has remained stuck in a narrow 15–25% band.[3]

Multiple drivers account for the collapse in trust, as I have explored elsewhere for the cases of South Africa and the USA (Levy et al., 2021; Levy, 2022a, 2025a or 2025b). They include high and rising economic inequality, conflicts over culture and identity, and the machinations of populist political entrepreneurs. Even recognising this broader terrain, a set of seemingly narrower questions concerning the public sector has continued to nag at me. Might mainstream approaches to public-sector governance, broadly embedded in New Public Management (NPM),[4] have contributed to a loss of civic trust in the legitimacy of the public domain? Might broadening the agenda of public-sector reform comprise a useful part of a path towards renewal?

These questions have special resonance for those of us who work on challenges of public governance in low- and middle-income countries, where there is a wealth of experience and scholarship on how participatory approaches can help improve development outcomes at both the micro and more systemic levels, even in the face of political, institutional and bureaucratic messiness. The companion TWP Working Paper (Levy, 2025a) lays out the theoretical underpinnings of a socially embedded bureaucracy (SEB) and synthesises evidence on SEB at the micro level. At the systemic level, two influential books by the US sociologist Peter Evans (1979; 1995) explored how, contrary to a standard top-down and normative narrative, East Asia's developmental states centred around close-knit developmental alliances between business interests and the state. In 2015, Evans and Patrick Heller extended the vision beyond elites, incorporating contributions and pressures from the population more broadly into their analysis of how developmental states can evolve in the twenty-first century:

> *The twentieth century developmental state's interaction with industrial elites gave these elites a reason to become a more collectively coherent class. The twenty-first-century developmental state needs to undertake a similar but more difficult task: constructing shared coherent goals whose concrete implementation can then be 'co-produced' by public agencies and the communities themselves.* (Evans and Heller, 2015, p. 695)

In high-income countries, too, there has been increasing scholarly interest in reforms centred around a reformulation of the state–society interface, under the rubric of New Public Governance (NPG). As Laura Cataldi (2024, p. 42) put it in a recent review, 'NPG promises a re-democratization of the public sector after what is recognised as a period of destructive dominance by New Public Management'.

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[3] https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2024/06/24/public-trust-in-government-1958-2024/

[4] For an overview of New Public Management, see: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_public_management#:~:text=New%20public%20management%20(NPM)%20is,sub%2Dnational%20and%20national%20levels

While Cataldi is broadly supportive of NPG, she also points to a hazard that I try to avoid both in this Think Piece and its companion Working Paper (Levy, 2025a) – namely that enthusiasm for NPG among its champions tends to outrun both conceptual clarity and empirical evidence:

> *NPG may be an umbrella concept under which a large variety of governance innovations are assigned that may have very little in common……Most of the proposed NPG solutions are situated at the level of principles such as participation, deliberation and co-creation of public value, rather than being concrete tools……NPG seems to propose models of management, governance and reform that are too abstract, and ultimately lacking in terms of concrete administrative tools.* (Cataldi, 2024, p. 19)

The research introduced in this Think Piece and the companion Working Paper (Levy, 2025a) aims to help fill the gap identified by Cataldi by exploring one aspect of the broader NPG agenda – a 'socially embedded bureaucracy' (SEB). As understood in this paper, SEB is characterised by *problem-focused relationships of cooperation between staff within public bureaucracies and stakeholders outside government, including governance arrangements that support such cooperation.*

Note that, insofar as the focus here is on relationships between non-governmental stakeholders and public bureaucracies, the emphasis is less on the various forms of direct deliberative democracy that have been the object of much recent innovation, and more on embeddedness at the administrative level.

Questions concerning the value of SEB arise at both the micro and more systemic levels:

- *At the micro level*: what is the potential for improving public-sector effectiveness by fostering problem-focused relationships of cooperation between staff within public bureaucracies and stakeholders outside government?
- *At the systemic level:* To what extent do gains in addressing micro-level problems – and associated gains in trust among the stakeholders involved – cascade beyond their immediate context and transform perceptions more broadly, thereby contributing to a broader renewal of the perceived legitimacy of the public domain?

This Think Piece provides an overview of the debates surrounding each of these questions. By way of conclusion, it offers some reflections on whether and how a different balance might be found between hierarchical and SEB approaches – one that is responsive both to performance challenges and to challenges of legitimacy.

2. The (problem-level) effectiveness debate

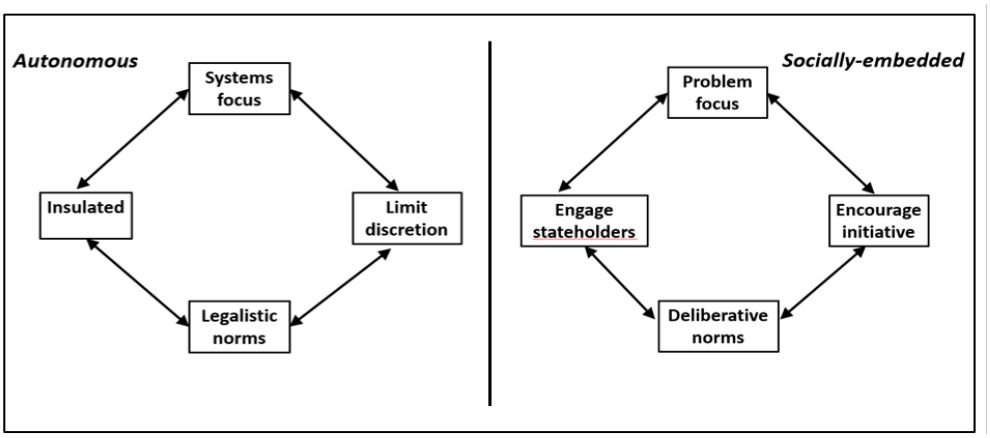
The conventional approach to bureaucratic governance introduced earlier provides a useful point of departure for exploring SEB's potential to improve public-sector effectiveness. The earliest roots of the conventional approach trace back to Imperial China. In its modern incarnation, it was codified in the work of the German sociologist Max Weber in the early twentieth century. It was updated in the latter part of the century by advocates of New Public Management (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The World Bank (2004)'s 'long route of accountability' offers a useful shorthand summary. It characterises bureaucracies (and their interface with society) as a hierarchical chain of principal-agent relationships grounded in a set of assumptions:

- Impartial elections resolve which competing political leaders will have power.
- Political leaders and technically skilled public officials then interact with one another in structured processes to craft coherent policy goals, aligned with the winning political platforms.
- Goals and policy having been set, rule-bound processes insulate public bureaucracy from political pressures, sustaining policy coherence.
- Within the rule-bound framework, hierarchically organised public bureaucracies proceed with implementation.

Accountability for performance is meant to be supported by a variety of horizontal mechanisms – the justice system and other formal institutions of checks and balances, plus a variety of less formal 'demand-side' mechanisms for holding government to account (e.g. advocacy/protest; championing transparency; investigative journalism).

This hierarchical and insulated vision has demonstrated its value in many contexts over long periods of time – but it falls short in critical ways. For one thing, as Wilson (1989) explores in his classic in-depth analysis of the US bureaucracy, even in contexts where background institutions are broadly supportive, bureaucratic rigidities can result in mediocre performance. For another, in contexts that lack the requisite (formal and informal) institutional underpinnings for bureaucracies to work as envisaged in the Weberian model, a preoccupation with conventional approaches to reform too often short-circuits the search for practical ways to address concrete problems that are anchored in contextual realities. Further, almost regardless of (potentially good) performance, in contexts where disillusion with the legitimacy of the public domain has taken hold, the distance between the state and society created by a combination of insulation from pressure and preoccupation with impersonal process compliance can exacerbate rather than mitigate social alienation. Might social embeddedness offer a constructive way of addressing these shortfalls?

Figure 1: Autonomous and socially embedded bureaucracies



Source: Author

Figure 1 highlights four ways (each explored in depth in the companion Working Paper, Levy, 2025a) in which SEB differs from the conventional characterisation of how bureaucracies 'should' work:

- SEB's point of departure is a focus on concrete problems – by contrast to conventional approaches that are more systems-focused ('getting the rules right');[5]
- SEB engages multiple stakeholders, and champions horizontal governance – by contrast to the conventional model's preoccupation with hierarchical institutional arrangements that are intended to insulate bureaucracies from day-to-day engagement with civic actors;[6]
- SEB fosters a deliberative discourse within public bureaucracies – by contrast to the conventional model which centres around legalistic organisational norms;[7] and
- SEB encourages initiative [and agency?] on the part of public employees – by contrast to the conventional model which prioritises an organisational culture in which public employees are tightly constrained by myriad rules.[8]

SEB can enhance public-sector effectiveness through a variety of distinct channels. A consistent thread across the channels is the role of social learning in fostering cooperation. But, beyond that, they differ from one another in the kind of governance challenges they help address, and in the extent to which success depends on confronting power asymmetries that protect the status quo. Three channels are noteworthy:

[5] See Andrews, Pritchett and Woolcock (2017) pp. 141–142 for an extended exploration of the value of a problem-driven approach.

[6] Ostrom (2005; 2009) explores horizontal governance in depth.

[7] See Mangla (2022) for an extended exploration of the contrast between legalistic and deliberative bureaucracies.

[8] Honig (2024) examines how mission-driven bureaucrats can add value.

- *Fostering synergies* – synergistic gains from cooperation between public bureaucracies and non-governmental actors.
- *Streamlining monitoring* – transforming the governance arrangements for monitoring and enforcement from a source of process compliance to a means of fostering pro-social norms.
- *Clarifying goals* – championing alliance-building among reform-oriented public officials and civil society actors as a way of both trumping powerful interests that are resistant to change and bringing greater clarity to the (problem-level) goals to be pursued by public agencies.

Box 1 draws on a comparative analysis of the political economy of education policy adoption (Levy, 2022b) to illustrate how the goal formation and monitoring and enforcement channels work in practice.

Box 1: How social embeddedness can help improve governance of basic education

The case of Peru provides a useful illustration of how social embeddedness can enable multiple stakeholders to coalesce around the shared goal of improving learning, even in a messy governance context. As Balarin and Saavedra (2023) detail, the country's education sector has long witnessed back-and-forth contestation among multiple stakeholders, each with distinctive aims and interests – including 20 ministers of education between the mid-1990s and early 2020s. Even so, between 2008 and 2018, very significant gains in learning outcomes were achieved. Paradoxically, contestation around the country's messy, iterative processes of policy formulation and adaptation helped build broad legitimacy for and trust in the technocrats and professionals responsible for policy formulation among civil society stakeholders (NGOs, universities, think tanks and research centres) – which enhanced their ability to push ack effectively against idiosyncratic initiatives proposed by political appointees.

The experiences of Ghana, Bangladesh and Kenya also illustrate how local coalitions helped strengthen (local level) norms to improve learning outcomes, even in the face of broader systemic weaknesses. In Ghana, according to Ampratwum et al. (2019, p.61):

> *Decentralization of education service delivery created new mechanisms and structures to empower regional- and district-level stakeholders…. The drivers of improved performance and accountability do not flow from the national to the local level but instead have to be regenerated at the level of districts and schools…. In [some] districts…. there was evidence of the emergence of a developmental coalition between community, school and district-level actors…. including 'political officials and teacher unions…. evident at district level, and mirrored at the community level.*

While in Bangladesh, according to Hossain et al. (2019, p.80):

> *Learning reforms were adopted and implemented to the extent that the relationship between school authorities, the local elites involved in school governance, and the wider community aligned behind improved teacher and student performance.*

In rural Kenya:

> *What one sees is an expectation for kids to learn and be able to have basic skills…. Exam results are…. posted in every school and over time so that trends can be seen. Head teachers are held accountable for those results to the extent of being paraded around the community if they did well or literally ban from school and kicked out of the community if they did badly.* (Piper, B., cited in Levy et al., 2018, pp. 280–281).

Delineating the channels through which SEB might enhance public-sector effectiveness is not, however, sufficient to make a credible case for its broader adoption. Gains need to be weighed against risks and costs. One challenge concerns how to open up space for problem-level innovation in contexts where the overarching organisational culture of public bureaucracies is legalistic and rule-following. More formidable are the risks that the empowerment of non-governmental stakeholders might, at one extreme, result in a paralysing 'vetocracy'[9] (in which stakeholders preoccupied with one aspect of reform are enabled to block the broader reform agenda as a whole) and, at the other, inadvertently open the door to a new cycle of capture by predatory actors. These are explored further in Section 4.

3. The (system-level) legitimacy debate

Turning to the second question highlighted in the introduction: what potential does SEB have to help revitalise social perceptions of the legitimacy of the public domain? Beyond SEB's (putatively positive) impact on public-sector effectiveness, is there a plausible case that scaling up SEB might also help to enhance the legitimacy of the state in the eyes of the population? This subsection explores these questions.

At the broadest level, as set out in Lipset's (1959) classic definition, legitimacy 'involves the capacity of a political system to engender and maintain the belief that existing political institutions are the most appropriate and proper ones for the society'. In their 2020 book, *The Narrow Corridor,* Nobel laureates Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson detail how legitimacy is underpinned by

> *...a balance between the state's power and society's capacity to control it.... This is the [state] that can resolve conflicts fairly, provide public services and economic opportunities, and prevent dominance..... This is the [state] that people, believing they can control it, trust and cooperate with and allow to increase its capacity...It stands not above but alongside society.* (Acemoglu & Robinson 2020, p. 64)

Acemoglu and Robinson's balance between strong states and strong societies can be achieved in a variety of ways. Social embeddedness offers one possible route, as suggested by the quote from Evans and Heller (2015) in the introduction, and the (problem-level) discussion in the previous section. But the opposite argument can also be made.

In their book, *Cooperation Without Trust,* Karen Cook, Russell Hardin and Margaret Levi (2007) argue that a preoccupation with relationships of trust between civil society and public bureaucracy is at best a distraction – and at worst a way of increasing the risks of both vetocracy and state capture.

[9] For an exploration of the hazards of vetocracy, see Fukuyama (2014), pp. 488–505.

Championing institutionalism, they determinedly push back against extrapolating too easily from micro-level success stories of cooperation to the systemic level:

> *When we are assessing the reliability of governments and politicians, what we ultimately put our confidence in is the quality of the institutional arrangements within which they operate.... At the personal level, relational trust makes our day-to-day lives richer and more manageable. More often, however, and in many varied contexts, we cooperate without trust.* (Cook, Hardin & Levi, 2007, p.153, 197)

The renowned progressive economist Sam Bowles (2016, pp. 142; 145–6) makes a similar case:

> *The legitimacy of teachers, police and court officers is based on their anonymity and lack of relationship to those they interact with.... My [approach] directs attention not to the cultural consequences of markets but rather to liberal political, judicial and other nonmarket institutions as the key to liberal civic culture.... By reducing risk, liberal society becomes a substitute for familial and parochial ties.... The result is a cultural environment favourable to the evolution of universal norms.*

The arguments advanced by Cook et al. (2007) and Bowles (2016) are plausible in contexts where institutions are strong, stable, and enjoy popular trust. But they are less compelling in contexts where disillusion and institutional decay have taken hold. In these contexts, renewing hope in the possibility and desirability of achieving gains through cooperation almost surely calls for more than yet another round of institutional engineering with limited, if any, attention to the quality of interaction between citizens and the public bureaucracy. In that spirit (and in contrast to the 2007 book of which Levi was a co-author), here is what Levi and Ugolnik argued in the lead article of an ambitious 2023 exploration of pathways to 'creating a new moral political economy':

> *A new moral political economy.... [will be centred around] .... some form of sociality and cooperation.... It demands attention to the governance arrangements that facilitate, even generate, prosocial behaviour.* (Levi & Ugolnik, 2023, pp. 7–9)

To be sure, nothing in Levi and Ugolnik's 2023 argument makes an explicit case for SEB. There are many ways to foster pro-sociality that are not linked to the interface between public officials and non-governmental actors. In the introduction, along with an absence of SEB, economic inequality, culture wars and populist politics were identified as drivers of a collapse of trust. As I explore in Levy (2025b), the logic of the argument is symmetrical: Trust potentially can be renewed not only by SEB, but also by an embrace of economic inclusion and by political leaders who centre their discourse around the win-win gains that can come from co-operation. Indeed, as Levy et. al. (2021) detail, both political statesmanship and the promise of economic inclusion were central to how a virtuous circle along these lines took hold in South Africa's first fifteen years of democracy. Indeed,

So, SEB clearly is hardly the only possible driver of pro-sociality. Even so, there is enough encouraging micro-level evidence vis-à-vis its ability to add value that its potential to support hope-evoking systemic change should not be dismissed out of hand – especially in contexts where disillusion runs deep.

Might these problem-level gains provide a platform for a broader transformation of the interface between citizens and public officials? And if so, how to get from 'here' to 'there'?

One place where that journey can begin is at the micro level, with the accretion of problem-level experience and learning potentially inspiring others to experiment with similar initiatives. Over time, multiple small initiatives might add up to more than the sum of their parts – with the pace of diffusion likely to depend, among other things, on the magnitude, salience, and visibility of the problems addressed via SEB approaches. Successfully addressing big challenges (the crisis of homelessness and affordable housing in Los Angeles, for example, which is a focus of my current research agenda) can have big impacts on citizens' perceptions as to what the public domain can achieve.

At a more directly systemic level, might a myriad of micro-level successes serve as potential building blocks for a broader social movement centred around deliberative problem-solving? Generally, civil society activists are likely to respond sceptically to SEB as running counter to a perceived mission of holding government to account. However, as a recent paper (Heywood & Levy, 2025) explores for the case of South Africa, in contexts where a combination of institutional decay and civic disillusion have taken hold, demand-side approaches to accountability risk fuelling rather than reversing institutional decline. In such contexts, a case can be made for civil society activism to shift from a confrontational to a more cooperative vision, centred around building cross-cutting coalitions oriented towards addressing collective problems, including with reform-minded public officials.

Finally, might forward-looking political leaders embrace an electoral and governance platform centred around a vision of partnership between the public sector and non-governmental actors? Political and social momentum anchored in deliberative problem-solving would be a radical departure from contemporary pressure-cooker discourses that are preoccupied with blame and 'us vs. them' adversarialism. These discourses thrive on raising rather than reducing the temperature, and potentially fuel disillusionment and undercut any sense of shared purpose. But, as Robert Putnam explored in the case of the USA in his 2020 book, *The Upswing*, in an earlier era grassroots activism fuelled collaborative, problem-focused activism at the interface between government and civil society. He argues that (unlikely as it might seem at a time when the storm of populist polarisation seems to be raging ever more fiercely), it might happen again:

> *A distinct feature of the [American 1880s-1920s] Progressive Era was the translation of outrage and moral awakening into active citizenship…Progressive Era innovations were a response – seeking to reclaim individuals' agency and reinvigorate democratic citizenship as the only reliable antidotes to overwhelming anxiety……[Similarly], our current problems are mutually reinforcing. Rather than siloed*

reform efforts, an upswing will require 'immense collaboration', [leveraging] the latent power of collective action not just to protest, but to rebuild. (Putnam, 2020, pp. 329–3310)

4. Conclusion – towards a new balance

As I have sought to show in this Think Piece, taking SEB seriously surfaces a series of dilemmas. Openness to stakeholders creates opportunities for better outcomes, but it also risks disrupting public bureaucracies' hard-won coherence, exacerbating challenges (e.g. 'vetocracy', state capture) to decisive action, and perhaps opening the door to capture. However, as Pollitt and Bouckaert (2017) explore, dilemmas come with the territory of public management reform – or any area that needs change:

> *While contemporary nostrums of public management reform appear to contain a number of contradictions.... rather than choosing between wholly incompatible alternatives...., some of these at least can be resolved into a question of finding an appropriate balance between different things that decision-makers want but cannot feasibly have more of all at the same time.* (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017, pp. 188–190)

How pressing a dilemma is depends less on the presence of some trade-off than on its severity and how that can be navigated: In order to have more of one thing, how much of the other(s) need(s) to be given up?

The good news is that there are abundant low-hanging-fruit opportunities for realising SEB's potential to enhance public-sector effectiveness before the trade-offs become too stark (see Box 1). At a problem level, the hazard of vetocracy might potentially be mitigated by vigorous efforts to foster a commitment among stakeholders to shared goals that are clear and time-bound; and the hazard of capture might potentially be mitigated by commitments to open and transparent processes. More broadly, insofar as the problem-focused initiatives that are the 'bread and butter' of SEB generally are 'downstream', close to service users, innovation downstream need not radically disrupt the bureaucracy's upstream budgeting, financial management, personnel, and other core systems.

What problem-level SEB initiatives seek from other parts of the bureaucracy is less rule-bound rigidity and more deliberative engagement – and this is less a trade-off than a hallmark of a well-functioning organisation. Indeed, the challenge of reconciling innovation with the hierarchical logic of bureaucracies is a familiar one in the literature on private organisations, with a clear answer – 'shelter' innovation from an organisation's mainstream business processes. As Clayton Christensen put it in *The Innovator's Dilemma* (2017):

> *Disruptive projects can thrive only within organizationally distinct units...When autonomous team members can work together in a dedicated way, they are free from organizational rhythms, habits*

> *and reporting requirements and are free to forge new patterns of interaction and problem solving.*[10] (Christensen, 2017, p. 120)

Perhaps what has made it so difficult for champions of SEB and guardians of received public-management practice to work together is less the severity of the actual risks and trade-offs involved than the discomfort that can arise (on all sides) when strongly held ideas are challenged. In his book *Seeing Like a State,* James Scott (1998) gets to the heart of the matter, arguing as follows:

> *A recurrent theme of Western philosophy and science, including social science, has been the attempt to reformulate systems of knowledge in order to bracket uncertainty and permit logical deductive rigor.....High modernism - A supreme self-confidence about....the development of scientific and technical knowledge [and] the rational design of social order - is the ideology par excellence of the bureaucratic intelligentsia, technicians, planners, engineers.... [even though], as Aristotle recognised, certain practical choices cannot, even in principle, be adequately and completely captured in a system of universal rules*. (Scott, 1998, pp. 89, 96, 321-322)

While modernist approaches to bureaucracy have yielded major economic and social gains, changing times can bring new challenges. Evans and Heller (2004)'s exhortation quoted in the introduction points to a contemporary challenge that urgently needs addressing. Happily, the work this Think Piece summarises suggests that a constructive set of possibilities is at hand, ready to be worked with – but only if we are willing to loosen the chains of ideas that hold us back from exploring creative new ways forward.

[10] James Q Wilson (1987, p. 231) draws a similar conclusion: 'To implement a proposed change often requires creating a specialised subunit that will take on the new tasks'.

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