

## Book Review

*Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)*  
Elizabeth Anderson, with an Introduction and Comments by Others.  
Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2017.

Reviewed by Donald R. Officer

When people see “Private Government” in a title they might associate it with the public-private partnerships which became a tool to bring more investment into the public sector late in the last century. The advantages of such arrangements lay in not having to raise taxes while avoiding some of the regulatory delays which impeded task completion. The fly in the ointment as with any agreement with private sector partners was holding them fully accountable for their parts in such agreements.

However, this is not what University of Michigan philosophy professor Elizabeth Anderson refers to in her 2017 book *Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk about It)*. Granted, the slipperiness of private sector partnership practices probably did in some measure prompt her to write it.

## Contributors and Commentators

This short incisive work is the adapted transcript of Anderson's contribution to Princeton University's Tanner Lectures hosted by Princeton's Center for Human Values. Anderson's text is supplemented by Professor Stephen Macedo's summarizing introduction (Princeton University) with commentaries from four faculty members representing English, economics, history, philosophy and politics perspectives that question Anderson's case. The text also includes her rebuttals with further support. See: **References** for citations of the names associated with each of the above disciplines.

The author of several books which highlight the intersection of politics, society, the economy and ethics, Elizabeth Anderson, Max Shaye Professor of Public Philosophy, John Dewey Distinguished University Professor and Arthur F. Thurnau Professor takes a strong clear and documentable position on the vulnerability of the employee in the modern workplace. She speaks primarily of the American experience, but similar constraints apply to organizations based on common law in the English tradition. Elsewhere long-standing oppressive practices dating back to antiquity still prevail. Even most democracies – with few exceptions – show the same sort of neglect respecting workers' rights, in kind if not degree which is the core focus of *Private Government*.

Today's status quo was not predicted. The dramatic advent of the industrial era heralded a huge leap forward in production capacity leading to massive advances in social transformation and eventually to political reform as well as in overall public welfare. Unfortunately for most workers, the redesign was not totally benign. Anderson's argument pivots around the great leap backwards as mass production forced independent craftspeople and suppliers to give up their autonomy to toil slavishly on production lines performing repetitive tasks at speed to meet quotas set by factory bosses and their intermediaries. Some but hardly all the abuses were addressed step by grinding step in later decades. At time of writing trade still trumps human rights as Anderson explains.

Before the radical transformation wrought by the industrial revolution and the explosion of global trade it triggered the more open system which replaced the remnants of the old feudal order was championed by thinkers and activists as an unquestionable positive. Even by current standards the early free market egalitarians were not exactly libertarians. Some favoured universal social insurance, pensions, public education, and an array of benefits we now take for granted, but also many we have yet to see implemented such as protections against income precarity and contract workers who are effectively employees. A vanguard leaned to the left. But unlike Marxists and other industrial age reformers other advocates sought effective autonomy for everyone. Only later were they discouraged as factions emerged within what had once been a far more open market.

### **Workplace Oppression: Then and Now**

On learning of the extreme horrors of the early industrial factory – starvation wages, unspeakably long hours, intolerable expectations, and few benefits – the reader might correctly note how fortunate we are that the Dickensian period has passed into history. Sadly, that passage is not exactly complete. The hungry ghosts of colonialism, class privilege and other species of discrimination remain closely tied to what is ironically called liberalism or more recently neoliberalism. Those appellations imply freedom only for owners and senior managers, decidedly not for their underlings.

What is it like for the average employee? In Anderson's own words "Most workers in the United States are governed by communist dictatorships in their work lives." Harsh words though not totally inapplicable. Confronted by such language most of us would do a doubletake. Partly because we usually feel free in our off hours, partly because we enjoy more autonomy than citizens living under a totalitarian regime ever do and partly because we have been brainwashed to believe the "other assigned duties" clause in our employment contract is both regular and appropriate. But should it be?

In *Private Government* the author applies a human rights approach to that question. Lifelong brainwashing and a demanding labour market prevent us from questioning what might eventually be asked of us when we sign on to the corporation, the government, or the profession we've studied so long and hard to join. And many of us love our work, take pride in the identity and security it provides. Surely there is no shame in that! Until. Until we are put in an impossible position by a demanding boss, are forced to endure some subtle (or blatant) form of humiliation,

are pressured to follow strictures like dress codes or take unnecessary risks that have no bearing on any aspect of our jobs.

### **Omnipresent and Unobserved Though Otherwise in Plain Sight**

We can be sanctioned, punished, or dismissed if we forget any of that. Career paths are long and sometimes winding. We soon learn the rules of the road. Entry level workers may seem more oppressed than mid-range employees, but the pressures veterans endure are often as arbitrary and worsen as retirement looms. This career long precarity is sharply critiqued in *Private Government*. Too many employees live in a gilded cage.

That cage has been dubbed *Capitalist Realism*, the title of Mark Fisher's book which likens the system we live under to its communist equivalent labeled "Socialist Realism." Life under Capitalist Realism differs from Socialist Realism, but you see in both ideologically inspired regimes a numbing familiarity, albeit with important twists. Options under both regimes are few, challenging and diminishing over lifetimes. The objectives of both ideologies have always been to motivate and energize – and oh yes, to discourage any whisper of disagreement mainly through shame but in the end, fear.

Can we moderate the central importance of our current socioeconomic environment, or the role given to work and the work ethic we hear so much about? Seems unlikely. What we can and should attempt is to recognize that workplaces in our society function much like an authoritarian level of government whether acknowledged or not. As such, employers and particularly corporations should be more directly accountable to their employees as human beings with constitutional and regular legal rights. This is the main point Elizabeth Anderson makes in *Private Government*.

### **Differing Perspectives**

The story Anderson tells leads directly to the accountability issue and that is the focus she brings to her commentators who assert in their rebuttals that differing perspectives should prevail or moderate her conclusions. Yet, on account of accountability her case would remain solid as a stand-alone proposition. However, she also opens the door to considering other ethical and legal principles which corporations like already recognized levels of government should consistently apply.

If we are to deepen our democracies, we need more innovative and fewer fearful voices expressing a wider more thoughtful range of ideas. As it is, only sitting members of legislatures, tenured professors and a few privileged outliers enjoy anything like a reasonable range of freedom of speech.

Income insecurity is a serious risk in expensive economies like ours. The power of the purse has a knock-on effect in the form of social competitiveness, media spin, historical precedence, legal imbalances, and tolerated prejudice which deter resistance in any form or

forum. Jobs take energy and commitment pressuring many to overlook personal injustices. Taking up a cause, however justified, could damage your career.

That looming threat increases the arbitrariness of the unwritten rules which dominate working life and help explain why change is so difficult. The decline in union membership over the past half century is evidence of how hard it is to fight both corporate headquarters and city hall. Nonetheless, the responders to Anderson's critique and proposal have posited fair objections which may explain why her solutions which begin with recognition of the authoritarian anti-democratic nature of workplace regulation and move towards a more inclusive structure of governance for organizations reflected in constitutional law are not obvious to everyone else.

The criticisms and qualifications of all four respondents suggest that the turning points in the conditions dominating today's organizations began before industrialization or ruthless global competition. Other commentators have also noted that both labour law and workplace customs emerged grudgingly and gradually out of the skills-based apprenticeships and master-servant relationships of old. Deferential language survives in employment contracts or codes of conduct as it does in landlord-tenant agreements.

While Anderson's responses to her commentators address the issues they raise, her argument does not concern how modern expectations in most workplaces expanded beyond acceptable boundaries, but whether those should still exist in today's societies. The complexity of modern working life demands new more autonomous arrangements commensurate with greatly transformed responsibilities. This is a fair observation.

We have the technologies and social science insights to manage more respectful as well as more efficient, working arrangements. Already in many workplaces collegial cultures prevail. But these conditions are too often at management's discretion. Mightn't we not formalize fairer workplace practices while recognizing the reality of a changing world? Anderson's suggestions are not the only way to remove the obstacles to deeper democracy and wider equality. But shouldn't they be on the table?

### **About the Author:**

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