



Ten years after: The rise and fall of managerial autonomy in Pompeii



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ABSTRACT

In September 1997, an ad hoc law ([Law no. 352/1997](#)) gave the archaeological site of Pompeii a new status. Its previous status as a local branch of the Ministry of Culture (the *Soprintendenza*) was reconfigured as an autonomous entity (*Soprintendenza autonoma*). In July 2008, the Italian Prime Minister declared a one year state of emergency in Pompeii, appointing a special Commissioner (*Commissario straordinario*) in order to cope with “the serious critical situation of the archeological area” (OPCM 3692/2008). The aim of the paper is to review the process of change in Pompeii over ten years, observing major institutional transformations and analyzing the evolution of activities and human and financial resources management. Beyond the substantive elements of interest (the mismanagement of one of the most important archaeological sites in the world), the paper sheds lights on the role of accountability in the cultural sector and on the distinctive features of Italian public administration, questioning the existence of a path of international convergence in public sector change.

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1. Introduction

During the 1990s, the introduction of economic and managerial knowledge in cultural and arts organizations was extensively debated in disciplines such as economics ([Moore, 1968](#); [Throsby and Whitters, 1979](#); [Peacock et al., 1982](#); [Baumol and Baumol, 1985](#); [Di Maggio, 1991](#); [Frey, 1994](#); [Towse, 1997](#); [Caves, 2000](#)), curatorship ([Wilson, 1989](#); [Boylan, 1992](#); [Moore, 1994](#); [Janes, 1995](#); [Edwards, 1996](#); [Van Hemel and Van der Wielen, 1997](#); [Cannon-Brookes, 1998](#); [Bennett, 2001](#)), and management studies ([Nantel and Colbert, 1992](#); [Carnegie and Wolnizer, 1996](#); [Rentschler and Potter, 1996](#); [Christiansen and Skærbæk, 1997](#); [Fitzgibbon and Kelly, 1997](#); [Clarke et al., 1999](#); [Gilhespy, 1999](#); [Botti, 2000](#); [Zan, 2002, 2006](#); see [Mariani and Zan, 2011](#), p. 118 for a review). This was part of a broader debate concerning the transfer (some would prefer the word ‘colonization’) of managerial practices and economic discourses from the private to the public sector that was taking place under the pressures of New Public Management policies, which promoted a smaller public sector and focused intensively on efficiency and continuous improvement ([Grueing, 2001](#); [Pollitt, 2001](#); [Lapsley, 2008](#)).

The creation of new organizational forms – i.e. agencies and bodies with various degrees of autonomy over intermediate and operational levels – was one of the main innovations introduced in order to translate NPM ideas into practice ([Christensen and Lægread, 2006](#); [Verhoest et al., 2004](#); [Fedele et al., 2007](#); [Hyndman et al., 2013](#)). Within the cultural sector, scholars have studied the creation of independent trusts for managing museums ([Roodhouse, 2000](#); [Zan, 2006](#)), the transfer of authority over cultural services from government agencies to non-profit organizations ([Cavenago et al., 2002](#)), the

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transformation of Opera Houses into quasi-private foundations (Sicca and Zan, 2005), and the introduction of private-public partnerships in museum governance (Roodhouse, 1999; Wilson and Boyle, 2004). More general studies have focused on *desétatisation* attempts within State entities, i.e. attempts to ‘exit’ the public sector without the sale of assets and cultural goods (privatization) (Van Hemel and Van der Wielen, 1997; Zan et al., 2007). However, after the initial excitement over this topic, in the following years less attention has been paid to the analysis of what has happened to these ‘new’ organizational forms, i.e. to which extent they have survived or have been transformed through the years.

Furthermore, almost a decade after the introduction of the debate on managerial approaches to cultural organization, the initial interest in the topic appears to be diminishing, despite its relevance in the realm of practice, where managerial-like reforms have been extensively introduced in arts organizations (albeit with varying degrees of success and effectiveness). Lindqvist (2012), in fact, has recently maintained that,

The cultural sector is only of marginal interest for journals of public administration and management. This lack of interest in the arts and culture is astonishing given the importance given to culture by politicians engaged in urban and regional development. (p. 18)

The same comment holds true for the field of accounting. Mariani and Zan (2011) report that a search on Science Direct using ‘art’ and ‘accounting’ yielded only two relevant papers, all of them published before the year 2000 (e.g. Christiansen and Skærbæk, 1997; Zan et al., 2000).

The aim of the present paper is to analyze the evolution and the effects of the reform of the Archeological Superintendence of Pompeii from 1997 to 2008, using a framework of analysis linking together the notions of managerialization, autonomy and accountability. The time period under analysis begins in 1997 with the transformation of the Superintendence of Pompeii from a local branch of the Ministry of Culture into an autonomous entity. Our narration ends in July 2008, when the Italian Prime Minister declared a state of emergency in Pompeii, appointing a special Commissioner (*Commissario straordinario*) in order to cope with “the serious critical situation of the archeological area” (OPCM 3692/2008). This peculiar solution created an even greater centralization, essentially ending the autonomy experiment.

In the recent Italian administrative history, Pompeii is more than an example. When the reform was approved in 1997, Pompeii was presented as a sort of experiment, a test to see if further reforms were feasible throughout the Ministry (and indeed in the general provision of public services, through a ‘light-weight State’). Between 1997 and 1998, one of the authors analyzed the development of the Superintendence of Pompeii from its creation in 1982 to its new status of autonomous Superintendence in order to assess whether “promises and expectation for change are to have any chance of success” (Zan, 2002 p. 92). Developed in real time in the months following the publication of the law in 1997 (the Italian version of the article dates 1998), the study “[did] not, however, provide an analysis of actual impacts of the new regulation [because] change needs time” (p. 92) and because the aim was just to test *ex ante* if the new norms were in line with the needs for change that could be identified by looking at the Superintendence in the pre-reform period. Ten years later, there are enough data to understand what impact, if any, the introduction of a ‘managerial’ discourse in Pompeii has had.

The paper is structured as follows: in the next section, we outline our framework of analysis. After the methodological section, we go in-depth into the administrative history of Pompeii, analyzing the rise of the autonomy (1997), its fall (2008), and the period in between. In the following section, we explore the changes that have taken place in Pompeii in terms of both professional and visitor related activities and human and financial resources. Finally, we discuss our findings and provide some direction for future research.

2. Framing autonomy, accountability and managerialization in Pompeii

In order to understand the rise and fall of managerial autonomy in Pompeii, an introduction to the analytical concept of autonomy is needed. We can define autonomy as the ability to make independent decisions or as the capacity for one actor to produce her or his own rules regarding a particular task. Rather than simply being present or absent in absolute terms, autonomy can be better understood as a multidimensional construct, in which variations can occur along different dimensions (Christensen and Lægread, 2006). As recognized by Verhoest et al. (2004, p. 105), an entity can have “managerial autonomy with respect to financial management (e.g. shifting budgets between line items or over years), human resources management (e.g. the selection of employees) or the management of other production factors like logistics, organization and housing”. Within the NPM debate, organizational autonomy plays a central role. Indeed, in many countries, reforms have promoted decentralization processes, aiming at the creation of “accountable units [and] more business like entities” (Lapsley, 2008, p. 84), where small core ministries are responsible for strategy and a range of specialized, semi-autonomous agencies are in charge of operations (Pollitt, 2001).

In the context of cultural organizations, the pressure towards ‘managerialization’ raises a plurality of issues that need to be addressed in order to understand which dimensions call for autonomy and managerial attention. Management knowledge, developed in commercial contexts over the last 60 years, appears to be a relatively new invention if considered from the perspective of an institution such as Pompeii, which has been operating for more than 250 years since its discovery in 1749. Museology – or archaeology in the specific case of Pompeii – has provided guidelines on how to run these kinds of organizations from a professional viewpoint for many years, and continues to do so today. However, ever since Thatcherism gave rise to the development of the concept of ‘value for money’ and the general process of ‘economizing’ (Hood, 1995a,b; Bowerman, 1996; But and Palmer, 2000; Gruening, 2001), cultural organizations – for the most part public or at least

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