

Anxiety, ideology and the evacuation of the public realm

How private accommodation prevents public learning

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Abstract

Relational public services can improve individual lives while leaving the public system which produced the difficulty substantially unchanged. This paper asks why. We define the evacuation of the public realm as a specific failure of learning: deficits exposed in particular citizens' lives are privately absorbed by citizens, practitioners, and local teams rather than being allowed to challenge the common arrangements which produced them. The mechanism is not only managerial. Singular demand exposes institutions to uncertainty about task, authority, value, and responsibility. Roles, measures, and ideologies make that uncertainty manageable by converting it into defined performance problems within its frame. They also support identities and interests which are put at risk when the frame itself is questioned. We distinguish performance anxiety from the more basic anxiety of having to act when the existing frame no longer guarantees what should be done. We then connect this to the strategy ceiling, the sponsoring system, and the political economy of risk displacement. Relational practice re-opens the public realm only when learning from the particular can cross into organisational and publicly authorised revision of rules, resources and responsibilities. A capability for re-framing, something that this paper refers to as negative capability, is therefore not just a personal virtue. It has to be built into governance.

Keywords: public realm; anxiety; ideology; relational public services; strategy ceiling; social defences; organisational learning; political economy; negative capability

1. The public realm is lost when the particular stays private

By the public realm we mean the shared space in which questions about what should be done, for whom, by whom and at whose cost can be argued in common rather than settled only through private bargains or administrative routines. It is not identical with the state, a public meeting, or formal politics. It is a property of a system of governance: experience can enter common consideration and, if necessary, change the rules (Arendt, 1958; Sennett, 1977; Boxer, 2004).

Our central claim is simple: the public realm is evacuated when the deficits exposed in particular citizens' lives are privately absorbed or privately accommodated, rather than being allowed to challenge the common arrangements that produced them.

A citizen may absorb the deficit by doing more work, waiting longer, managing risk, or going without. A family may absorb it through unpaid care. A practitioner may absorb it by bending a rule, making another phone call, carrying an unofficial caseload or quietly becoming the person who joins the system together. A local team may build an exceptional service which protects people from the ordinary machinery. Any of these may be humane. None, by itself, re-opens the public realm.

This distinction matters because relational practice is often judged at the encounter. Did the worker listen? Was there continuity? Did the citizen feel known? Those things matter. But a good relationship can become an insulating layer between the person and an unchanged institution. The citizen gets a better experience while the common rules, measures and resource flows remain untouched. In the worst case the relational worker becomes the person paid to carry what the system refuses to learn.

The issue is therefore not a choice between personal relationship and institutional reform. It is whether learning from the personal relationship can become consequential for the institution and, where the issue is genuinely public, for the wider settlement.

2. A value deficit does not disappear when a service cannot hold it

Public services are necessarily designed around what is common. They need repeatable capabilities, rights, standards, and categories. Yet every life also contains variation which no standard offer can fully predefine. Boxer describes this as asymmetric demand: the citizen's context of use contains something which the supply side cannot infer from its own categories alone (Boxer and Cohen, 1998).

When the available response does not produce what the situation requires, a value deficit opens. The deficit may be obvious – no service exists, a threshold excludes the person, or two organisations each say the problem belongs to the other. It may also be hidden inside a successful transaction. The assessment was completed on time; the person still fell. The referral was made; the family had to coordinate three services. The target was met; the purpose was not.

The orthotics case used in Boxer's earlier work is a clean example. Earlier, sustained treatment could reduce later acute and social costs by several times the initial investment, but costs and benefits sat in different parts of the system. The evidence was not enough. There was no mechanism and no sponsorship for the change (Boxer, 2004). The value deficit was therefore left to be carried elsewhere.

A similar pattern appears across relational public service work. Navigators, key workers, social prescribers, neighbourhood teams, and voluntary organisations can make fragmented systems usable. Sometimes this is exactly the right response. The question is what happens to what they learn. If their work reduces visible failure while leaving the surrounding thresholds, budgets, and interfaces untouched, the institution can become more comfortable without becoming more capable.

3. Performance anxiety is not the same as primary anxiety

Why is evidence from the particular so hard to take up? Part of the answer lies in anxiety, but the word needs care. Public organisations contain ordinary performance anxiety: can we deliver the agreed task, within money, law, time and quality? That anxiety is real and useful. It can be reduced through competence, planning, clearer roles, and better control.

A different anxiety appears when the evidence suggests that the task, category, or authority itself is wrong. The problem is no longer 'can we do this properly?' but 'what if this is not the thing we should be doing?' The answer cannot be supplied simply by performing the existing role better. It requires judgement about the frame which made the role sensible in the first place.

Hirschhorn called the related problem 'primary risk': the risk of having chosen the wrong task. In Boxer's later work the issue is tied more deeply to an originating lack – the absence of a final guarantee which could tell a subject, once and for all, what the right act will be. The psychoanalytic account matters to the argument, but the organisational point can be stated plainly. Some uncertainty can be solved with more information. Some appears because the system's own categories have reached their limit.

The second kind of anxiety is much harder for institutions to hold. A target can be tightened. A process can be improved. A budget can be balanced. It is much more disruptive to ask whether the target is producing the wrong behaviour, whether the process is creating the demand it handles, or whether the budget is balanced only because costs have been displaced into another service or household.

That is why the particular is politically charged. It does not merely ask for an exception. It can put the common frame into question.

4. Institutions support identifications, not just tasks

An institution is more than an arrangement of work. Roles, professions, measures, hierarchies, and stories about purpose give people ways of knowing who they are in relation to the organisation. They support identifications: ways of taking up a position, not a fixed inner 'identity'. A finance director, social worker, commissioner, clinician, regulator or elected member is not simply executing tasks. Each role is attached to ideas of competence, duty, legitimacy and what good work looks like.

This is why changes which look technical can feel existential. A new measure can imply that the old account of good performance was wrong. A citizen's situation can reveal that a professional boundary is part of the problem. A place-based budget can threaten the authority by which an organisation understands itself. The issue is not that people are irrationally attached to the past. The current form gives them a workable relation to responsibility and risk.

The Tavistock tradition distinguishes the operative organisation – how work is actually arranged to produce outcomes – from the wider referent and regulative arrangements which define whose interests the work serves and what is allowed to count as legitimate (Menzies Lyth, 1960; Armstrong, 1997). Boxer's 'strategy ceiling' is the boundary between what can be questioned in the work and the assumptions which remain protected from that questioning (Boxer, 2011).

The sponsoring system sits on both sides of the ceiling. It includes formal leaders and governing bodies, but also professions, contracts, measures, budget conventions, and the people below the ceiling who continue to enact the job as defined. Boxer's phrase 'libidinal economy of discourses' is one way of naming how these identifications and investments are distributed through an institution. In plainer terms: the system is reproduced because many people, for different reasons, get security, authority, status, or moral coherence from the present arrangement.

A defence against anxiety is therefore not an invisible force inside 'the institution'. It is an organised pattern of mutual support. That is why institutional change cannot be reduced either to individual courage or to structural redesign. The two are coupled.

5. Ideology turns uncertainty into a manageable account

Ideology is often used as an accusation: the beliefs other people have when they mistake politics for fact. We use it more neutrally. An ideology is an organising account of what the world is like, what institutions are for, what kinds of action are legitimate and what counts as evidence of success. It gives a formation coherence and authority (Foucault, 1972; Žižek, 1989).

Public institutions cannot work without such accounts. The difficulty comes when the account cannot itself be put at risk by what the institution encounters. The ideology then does more than orient action. It protects the frame from the deficits the frame creates or cannot hold.

Targets are a simple example. A target is not inherently pathological. It can clarify a legitimate purpose and protect citizens from arbitrary variation. But a target can also convert primary anxiety into performance anxiety. Instead of asking whether the task is right, we ask whether the task is on track. Instead of asking what happened in the citizen's life, we ask whether the process met its standard. The institution becomes more certain at the same time as it becomes less able to hear what does not fit.

The same mechanism can sit inside very different political ideologies. A market account may individualise risk and treat public trouble as personal choice. A bureaucratic welfare account may classify the same trouble as a case to be processed through a universal category. A professional account may turn it into a problem owned by a discipline. New Public Management has often intensified the use of targets, contracts, and provider categories, but it is too easy to make it the sole villain. The deeper issue is closure: an organising account which can no longer be revised by the demands it exists to serve.

Political economy enters here because closure is never only psychological. Rules distribute money, risk, time and voice. Some groups benefit from the existing boundaries; others carry the deficits they

create. An ideology which makes those distributions appear natural or private removes them from public argument.

6. The Faustian pact: a humane exception which protects the rule

Boxer uses the image of a Faustian pact for a recurrent accommodation at the edge. The practitioner or local team is allowed enough freedom to make the situation work, provided they do not force the wider institution to confront what their work implies. The sponsor gets good outcomes and reduced pressure. The edge gets permission to help. The citizen may get something much better. The price is that the common frame remains intact.

This pact explains why heroic practice can coexist with institutional stasis. The local exception absorbs the value deficit which would otherwise return as a challenge to the centre. It is a bargain both sides may accept for sensible reasons. The worker wants to help now, not wait for constitutional reform. The sponsor wants the problem contained. Under pressure, both may prefer a workaround to a conflict about purpose, authority and money.

The bargain becomes dangerous when it is mistaken for reform. Relational work then becomes the soft edge of a closed system: more humane for those who reach it, but also more capable of preventing the consequences of closure from becoming publicly visible.

The state-level analogue is the privatisation of public trouble. Risks generated through housing, labour markets, disability, care, health, transport or fragmented administration are returned to citizens as problems of resilience, navigation, choice or personal responsibility. Market-state accounts can make this especially explicit (Bobbitt, 2002; Beck, 1992), but the mechanism is wider. Any public system can preserve its own coherence by exporting unresolved heterogeneity into households, communities or another part of the state.

A budget can therefore balance while the public realm shrinks. The missing cost has not vanished. It has changed hands.

7. Relational practice is necessary – and insufficient

Relational public-service reform is right to recover the importance of continuity, trust, judgement and working with the person rather than processing a case. It is also right to challenge systems which treat every demand as a transaction. But the language of ‘relational good, transactional bad’ obscures the institutional problem.

Some demand should be met transactionally. A clean transaction can be a public good: clear entitlement, low effort, anonymity, equal treatment and no requirement to disclose more of one’s life than necessary. Other demand is open and cannot be understood without engagement. A capable system needs both (Boxer and Taylor, 2026).

The political issue is not the amount of warmth in the encounter. It is whether the institution can allow what is learned there to revise its own task and organising assumptions. A relational encounter inside a fixed frame may help a person greatly. A relational strategy requires the system itself to remain open to re-formation around asymmetric demand.

This is where the strategy ceiling becomes decisive. If learning from the edge can alter only behaviour below the ceiling, relational practice remains an accommodation. If it can change measures, budgets, rules, boundaries, and public commitments, the practice begins to have a public life.

8. Re-opening the public realm means letting the particular travel

Re-opening the public realm requires a chain of movement which public-service reform often breaks. We suggest seven linked moves.

1. **Particular lives reveal deficits.** The situation shows where standard provision, existing categories or current organisation cannot produce the required effect. The deficit is evidence, not automatically an entitlement to a particular solution.
2. **The deficit is held rather than hidden.** Citizens and practitioners need enough support to prevent immediate harm, but the workaround is recorded as a signal about the system rather than treated as a private exception.
3. **The pattern is made visible.** Repeated deficits are connected across cases, services and communities. The system asks what they have in common without erasing what is singular in each.
4. **Learning reaches the strategy ceiling.** Evidence is put to the people and arrangements which own the relevant rules, money, measures, professions and boundaries.
5. **The sponsor has to answer.** The sponsoring system cannot merely applaud the local work. It must decide what will change, what will not, why, and who will carry the consequences.
6. **Revision is publicly authorised where it needs to be.** Some changes are managerial; others redistribute rights, resources, risk or obligation and therefore require democratic argument and authority.
7. **The new arrangement remains revisable.** The result is not a final relational model. It is a system better able to notice when its own settlement is again producing deficits it cannot see or hold.

This is more than an organisational learning loop. It describes a public learning architecture. The particular does not automatically rule the common, and the common does not automatically suppress the particular. Experience enters a process through which common arrangements can be questioned, justified and revised.

That also marks the difference between a relational encounter and a re-opened public realm. The first changes what happens between people. The second changes what can be learned and authorised in common.

9. Negative capability has to be institutional

Negative capability is usually described as a personal capacity to remain with uncertainty without reaching too quickly for a reassuring answer. Keats's phrase has been developed in organisational work by Bion and others as a way of thinking about leadership under uncertainty (Bion, 1970; Simpson, French and Harvey, 2002). It fits the problem here, but only if we resist making it another demand on heroic individuals.

A worker needs negative capability when a person's situation does not fit the categories available. A leader needs it when evidence threatens a cherished programme. A governing body needs it when the performance report says one thing and lived experience says another. A political system needs it when the consequences of a settlement cannot be reduced to a single measure or resolved without conflict. In each case there is a capability for re-framing is needed.

But people can bear uncertainty only within some form of holding. The frame holds by the way it limits uncertainties. Developing institutional negative capability therefore needs to be designed. It requires supervision which can hold doubt without immediately recoding it as failure; data which preserves the citizen's purpose rather than only service categories; budget and commissioning arrangements which can move resource across boundaries; measures which make displacement visible; rights and review which constrain arbitrary discretion; and sponsors who are obliged to answer evidence from below the ceiling.

The aim is 'good-enough' holding rather than maximum flexibility. Too much holding becomes capture: the institution fills the citizen's space with its own order. Too little becomes neglect: the citizen or worker is left with the uncertainty, risk and integration work the public system declines to

carry. A capable public realm must do enough to prevent abandonment without pretending it can remove every uncertainty.

Malicious obedience is not the best way of ensuring that the failure of a frame eventually becomes apparent, making space for constructive disobedience being so much more effective. Many important innovations begin because someone refuses to follow a rule which is producing harm. But a system which depends indefinitely on disobedience has failed to institutionalise learning. The point of public reform is not to create more heroic rule-breakers. It is to make fewer acts of heroism necessary.

10. Authority, politics and sustainment

The public realm is not re-opened by dissolving authority. Public services have to make binding decisions, enforce law, protect rights, allocate scarce resources, and sometimes coerce. Nor can every frontline insight become policy. The issue is how authority is connected to learning and contestation.

Three distinctions help. First, authorisation is not capability and responsibility for capability is rarely in the same place. A minister, council or board can authorise a new purpose without making the system capable of delivering it. Second, capability is not legitimacy. A local team may know what would work but lack the public authority to redistribute resources or change rights. Third, learning is not sustainment. A successful pilot can reveal a better response and still disappear if its budget, governance, measures and accountabilities remain temporary.

Re-opening the public realm therefore requires both horizontal and vertical movement. Horizontally, people and organisations have to compose capability around lives and places across an ever-widening span of complexity. Vertically, evidence has to travel into the structures which authorise, fund and regulate that work. Neither axis can replace the other.

This is where political economy matters most. Who is currently carrying the risk? Who gains from the boundary? Which costs are visible to finance (typically transactions) and which costs (typically of alignment and cohesion) are absorbed in time, care, health or community life? What interests are served by the strategy ceiling and which interests have voice above it? Questions of class, ownership, taxation and redistribution cannot be solved by relational practice; but relational practice can make their consequences harder to hide.

Sustainment is the final test. If a relational arrangement survives only while a particular leader, worker or discretionary grant is present, it remains a local accommodation. If its learning has changed the common rules and the new arrangement can continue to learn after those individuals leave, part of the public realm has been rebuilt.

11. Conclusion

The evacuation of the public realm is not simply privatisation in the narrow sense, nor the replacement of public provision by markets. It is the subtler process by which matters exposed through public life are prevented from becoming public questions. Deficits are returned to citizens, absorbed by practitioners, or contained in local exceptions. The system learns how to cope without learning how to change.

Anxiety helps explain why. A singular situation can expose not only a performance failure but a limit in the frame itself. Institutions have good reasons to seek certainty: they carry law, money, risk and public authority. Yet the roles, measures and ideologies which make action possible can also defend the institution against evidence that would require it to alter its purpose, boundaries or distribution of responsibility.

Relational practice matters because it brings more of the particular into view. It re-opens the public realm only when that knowledge can travel: from encounter, to pattern, to organisational learning, to the strategy ceiling, and where necessary into publicly authorised revision. Negative capability is therefore a property we need in institutions as well as people. It is the capacity to hold enough

uncertainty for the common frame to be questioned without abandoning the responsibilities that made a common frame necessary.

The practical question for any relational initiative is consequently quite severe: what has this work allowed us to learn that the ordinary system could not see, and what common arrangement will now change because we know it? If the answer is 'nothing', the work may still be good. It has not yet re-opened the public realm.

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