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# **Private Government: How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk About It): How Employers Rule Our Lives (and Why We Don't Talk About It) (The University Center For Human Values Series)**

## **Private** **Government**

How Employers Rule Our Lives  
(and Why We Don't Talk about It)

**Elizabeth Anderson**



## Synopsis

Why our workplaces are authoritarian private governments—and why we can't see it One in four American workers says their workplace is a "dictatorship." Yet that number probably would be even higher if we recognized most employers for what they are—private governments with sweeping authoritarian power over our lives, on duty and off. We normally think of government as something only the state does, yet many of us are governed far more—and far more obtrusively—by the private government of the workplace. In this provocative and compelling book, Elizabeth Anderson argues that the failure to see this stems from long-standing confusions. These confusions explain why, despite all evidence to the contrary, we still talk as if free markets make workers free—and why so many employers advocate less government even while they act as dictators in their businesses. In many workplaces, employers minutely regulate workers' speech, clothing, and manners, leaving them with little privacy and few other rights. And employers often extend their authority to workers' off-duty lives. Workers can be fired for their political speech, recreational activities, diet, and almost anything else employers care to govern. Yet we continue to talk as if early advocates of market society—from John Locke and Adam Smith to Thomas Paine and Abraham Lincoln—were right when they argued that it would free workers from oppressive authorities. That dream was shattered by the Industrial Revolution, but the myth endures. *Private Government* offers a better way to talk about the workplace, opening up space for discovering how workers can enjoy real freedom. Based on the prestigious Tanner Lectures delivered at Princeton University's Center for Human Values, *Private Government* is edited and introduced by Stephen Macedo and includes commentary by cultural critic David Bromwich, economist Tyler Cowen, historian Ann Hughes, and philosopher Niko Kolodny.

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## Customer Reviews

One of the main right-wing arguments against the formation of strong labor unions in the US is that they will slip into socialism and eventually lead to communism (the dictatorship of the proletariat). Professor Anderson's book, *Private Government*, relies upon political theory and real-life examples to show that, on the contrary, it's the hierarchical leadership structure in American companies that leads to a kind of dictatorship by the elite. American workers are often prescribed what to wear, when they can take bathroom breaks, and even what social and political beliefs they must hold if they want to keep their jobs. While hierarchy, to some extent, is necessary in private companies--to maintain order and some authority--Elizabeth Anderson compellingly argues that this kind of autocratic control of workers by company bosses is incompatible with the American principles of autonomy and equality. In this case, the dictatorship is not that of the Marxist proletariat, as the right fears, but of the the private enterprise elite. This book makes an important contribution not only to political philosophy, but also to our public discourse about private enterprise and the role of labor in the American economy.

In *Private Government* Elizabeth Anderson presents a compelling case that our political ideologies have been shaped by historical contingencies. Specifically, it made perfect sense for egalitarian reformers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to enthusiastically embrace free markets. State-backed monopolies were one among many forms of unjust hierarchy and domination, others being the clergy (who could forcibly extract tithes), the patriarchal family structure, chattel slavery, monopolist guilds, and the landed aristocracy. In an environment where freer markets meant more opportunities for individuals to tend their own land or their own shops and crafts, they represented

an important source of independence and freedom from domination by masters (what she calls republican freedom). But she argues no one could have predicted the Industrial Revolution or its ramifications. With the advent of factories employing hundreds of workers in repetitive tasks, the division between wealthy and powerful capitalists and poorer workers with few options became not a source of independence but just another form of oppressive hierarchy. Anderson argues that we have inherited the earlier rhetoric of free markets as a source of freedom--appropriate once upon a time--and continue to apply it today. By doing so we extend moral cover to employers to tyrannize workers anyway they see fit. Anderson laboriously documents examples of such tyranny, noting that it applies especially to poor and lower-skilled workers who are easily replaced and not so much to skilled workers and academics, who tend to have cushier careers. Importantly, Anderson is not just another leftist anti-capitalist with their head in the clouds. She endorses not only strong (but not absolute) property rights, but also acknowledges the value of market freedom as an important arena of agency and self-development. She embraces the market economy as a vital engine of wealth creation. She even acknowledges that firms in the market have solid reasons to need hierarchical organization and relatively open-ended authority of the bosses. But the regulatory contours of markets and property rights are socially established, and there is nothing intrinsic to the vigorous operation of a market economy that requires workers to check their dignity and so many basic rights at the door of the workplace. I don't agree with all of Anderson's suggestions. Tyler Cowen (one of the four responders) in particular landed some well-targeted criticisms of Anderson's argument. But at the very least Anderson has succeeded in obliterating the common knee-jerk defense of absolute employer freedom with respect to how they treat workers and organize the workplace. Notions of freedom and tyranny apply to the workplace.

Wow. This book is a revolution -- and hopefully will help cause one. The way we work is so tragically dysfunctional and we simply don't know how to talk about it. We conclude that work sucks and that's that. As Gallup shows us, the results are clear: 7 out of 10 of us are disengaged at work -- and we accept this as a normal cost of doing business. Anderson helps us see that work organization is not a given, it is not "natural" and it is something we can and should change. Thinking of companies as a form of private government is a brilliant way to reframe the discussion, and reveals one of the greatest ironies of modern democratic societies: While we celebrate democracy, most of us spend most of our waking hours under autocratic rule. A word about the format: Anderson provides two pithy essays (which I would love to get in PDF form by themselves), followed by reactions from thinkers in various fields. Anderson then responds to the feedback -- mostly in a genteel manner,

until she gets to the hotshot professor of economics whose "hey things aren't that bad" piece gets simply eviscerated by Anderson. A very satisfying ending indeed!

As someone who put in over a decade in a Fortune 500 firm and worked on K Street in DC, EA is spot on with respect to elucidating the unacceptable authoritarianism in workplaces in the US and elsewhere due to the legal regime that's created corporate governance. Liberty is dead, corporate managers have killed it.....

A series of university lectures; not for general public distribution

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