BUREAUCRACIES

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Summary

The term bureaucracy, which originally was a pejorative word, was conceptualized by Max Weber as the key term of modern government and society. Historically, modern state has required the development of state bureaucracy, and, because of their “rationality,” bureaucratic organizations have spread throughout society. Bureaucracies vary in their purpose, their relations with society, and the country in which they occur. In recent times, bureaucracies have responded to criticism by introducing new measures, and trying to accommodate the fall of the modern sovereign state system.

1. Origin of the Term

It is difficult to define the term “bureaucracy” in a word as it contains many connotations and often accompanies political values, just as many other political terms do. Bureaucracy is a term which was originally contrived by combining “bureau,” which meant desk in office, and “cracy,” which has meant “rule” since the ancient period. It is known that this latter term began to be put into use in France in the eighteenth century. At that time, bureaucracy meant exercise of power by officials and implied a new form of government that could be paralleled with monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, which all originated in ancient times. This term began to spread throughout Europe in the nineteenth century. In particular, in Germany “bureaucracy” began to be used as a term meaning administration. For example, at the time, Germany and England were compared against one another and it was often claimed that while Germany had a well-established bureaucracy, England did not. At the same time, people used this word to ridicule incompetence and to criticize imperious behavior among public officials, just as
Balzac did. In other words, during this period, the term “bureaucracy” was recognized pejorative.

2. Weber’s Conceptualization

The way in which the term “bureaucracy” is used significantly changed as Max Weber, a German sociologist, attached special academic significance to this term. In other words, through the works of Weber, the term “bureaucracy” developed into an important concept for analysis in social sciences. Phenomena signified by “bureaucracy” came to be widely recognized as socially important. However, Weber does not give a single definition to “bureaucracy.” Yet the way he uses this term in many of his works suggests that he has attached to the term “bureaucracy” the following connotations, summarized by Martin Albrow.

Weber, who was primarily interested in classifying types of rules, identified “rational rule” along with “charismatic rule” and “traditional rule.” He argued that “rational rule” was supported by the following five beliefs. (1) That it is possible to make laws which can make members of the organization obey. (2) That laws consist of a system of various regulations in abstract terms that are applied to specific cases and that administration protects the interests of the organization within the limit of laws. (3) That even those who exercise power follow this impersonal order. (4) That members of the organization follow the laws as they belong to the organization. (5) That members do not personally submit to those with power but follow the impersonal order that gives those who now have power ruling positions in the organization.

Weber argued that bureaucracy was the purest form of rational rule. Assuming that rational control is characterized by administration through documents, structuring of organizations by rules, and task sharing according to functions, he identified the following ten characteristics as nature of administrative bureaucracy.

1) The personal freedoms of staff members are secured and staff members follow duties that are impersonal.
2) There exists a clear differentiation of ranks among officials.
3) The duties of officials are clearly stipulated.
4) Officials are appointed through contracts.
5) Officials are selected on merits and, in principle, merit is endorsed by qualifications acquired through examinations.
6) Officials are provided with wages in the form of currency and also, normally, are entitled to receive a pension. Wages are determined according to the rank of each official in the organization. Officials can freely abandon their positions and under certain circumstances are subject to being discharged.
7) The sole or principal profession of each official is to serve in the organization.
8) The promotion of officials depends on the number of years they have worked, their work performance, and the judgments of their seniors.
9) Officials do not personally hold their positions nor various resources that accompany their positions.
10) Officials follow uniform order and discipline.
The modern bureaucracy, which has the aforementioned characteristics, is not only distinguished from patrimonial bureaucracy, but also from any organization based on a council system. Although Weber emphasized the aforementioned characteristics of the bureaucracy in order to make clear the contrast between modern bureaucracy and patrimonial bureaucracy, he argued that modern bureaucracy would become gradually superior to organization based on a council system. This was because, while such a rational rule also might be possible even under an organization based on a council system, such an organization would find it harder to keep uniformity and responsiveness because of compromises it would have to make within itself due to conflicts arising among different opinions and interests.

Therefore, if we follow Weber’s line of arguments, we can predict that the bureaucratic organization will expel other form of organizations. By making job-processing objective through division of labor, the bureaucracy becomes impersonal and is able to eliminate disturbance by unforeseeable and irrational personal emotions. As a result, the bureaucracy will become significantly more efficient. The bureaucracy, once completed, is hard to destroy because it will acquire perpetuity and its destruction will give rise to chaos. Therefore full development of bureaucracy makes it impossible to make constructive progress through violent revolution.

Although Weber held some reservations, he predicted the bureaucratization of society as a whole due to the superiority of bureaucratic organizations. Thus, he predicted of the Soviet Union after the revolution that the socialist revolution would not only maintain the bureaucracy but strengthen it. This in spite of the fact that Karl Marx had contended that bureaucracy was a cancer of the capitalist society and would be expelled by revolutions (see Communist System, Socialism and Communism). The superiority of bureaucratic organizations has been affirmed not only in Russia but various countries throughout the twentieth century, reaffirming the accuracy of his prediction. However, what he meant by calling bureaucracy rational pointed to formal rationality. We should note that he did not argue that bureaucratization was desirable since bureaucracy, in practice, often functions very inefficiently and is sometimes criticized from those who value human dignity.

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Bibliography


**Biographical Sketch**

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