

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.

3. Four Usages of the Term

In developing theory on bureaucracy in social sciences after Weber, the dominant approach has been to follow his lead. In particular, research by American sociologists has been important. Drawing from organizational theory developed in the United States, scholars such as P. Brau and R. Merton paid particular attention to informal organizations and personal elements in bureaucracy and analyzed the functions served by bureaucracy. They found that bureaucracies in reality contain various problems and observed phenomena referred to as the malfunctions of bureaucracy.

To summarize research conducted on bureaucracy so far, there are four connotations implied by the term "bureaucracy."

- 1) It refers to organizations with particular organizational structure.

- 2) It refers to epidemic phenomena particular to organizations, namely, behavioral patterns that are often criticized as bureaucratism.
- 3) It refers to administrative organizations of government that are a major feature of modern states.
- 4) It refers to a form of governance that has often been accused, in modern states, of being a form of politics characterized by rule by bureaucrats.

The following section treats bureaucracy with regard to the third connotation, while bearing in mind that it also includes the fourth connotation and briefly overviews problems related to bureaucracy in terms of administrative bureaucracy. Research after Weber often notes that there are many varieties in bureaucracy. For example, there are differences in the forms of bureaucracy depending on differences in its organizational objectives, on whether it is located at the top of the hierarchy, or is located at the bottom in confrontation with clients, and depending on which countries it is found in.

4. Hierarchy and Bureaucracy

How then do bureaucracies differentiate from one another according to their organizational objectives? While there are diversities according to differences in objectives, military and ordinary administrative bureaucracy often become the subject of comparison (see *Military Government*). In the military, clear hierarchy and unification of line of order are given utmost importance. The order always has to go down through one line and absolute obedience to your direct superior is required. There is strong aversion toward orders coming from different lines in the form of “noise,” because it is necessary to avoid being faced with entangled information making decisions extremely difficult in a pressurized situation. The military requires absolute obedience to your direct superior to make sure that the order from the top is completely passed down to the bottom, which reflects belief in the military that the military as a whole has to act uniformly. In this respect, the military is considered as an organization that has incorporated hierarchical order as its guiding principle to the extreme. However, to make order at the top, it is impossible for the supreme commander to make all orders him or herself, which makes it necessary to develop an organization that formulates orders. Such an organization can not be structured hierarchically and thus is separated from the hierarchical order. This is the separation of staff from line. Separation of staff from line originated in the Prussian Army and has gradually spread to ordinary organizations.

In addition, the military is often segregated from outside civilian society not only in times of war but also during periods of peace, due to the necessity of mobilization as well as the need to shut off noises as described above. Furthermore, in order to make chain of command clear, the military is controlled according to units such as division or regiment, which gives rise to sectionalism. As a result, the line of order becomes strong but thin and once the line is cut at some point due to some incident such as a coup d'état, it becomes extremely difficult to control the military as an organization. Such organizing principles guiding the military can be also found in the police or intelligence organizations. In the case of the intelligence organization, because the whole picture of the organization is kept blurred, even to its members, it contains organizational weakness as described above to an even greater degree.

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Biographical Sketch

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