

ANCIENT BUREAUCRACIES OF INDIA AND CHINA, AND MODERN ADMINISTRATION

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Keywords: ancient bureaucracy, Arthashastra, bureaucratic empires, chintu, Confucian brahmins, derivative middle class, feudalism, gesellschaft, imperial unity, Karl Marx, Kautilya, Max Weber, prebendal, Roman Empire, state enterprise.

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Summary

Serious studies of ancient imperial bureaucracies were neglected by western scholars for a long time and considered irrelevant in relation to modern public administration. In particular, Max Weber and Karl Marx promoted this attitude indirectly. The former labeled them as prebendal or patrimonial, dismissing them without much discussion. Karl Marx's occasional and marginal observations on the Asiatic mode of production (AMP) gave rise to a variety of interpretations by his followers and critics without any direct bearing on the role of bureaucracy. Their comments were nevertheless responsible for the delay in taking up serious studies of ancient bureaucracies. Interest was generated later with the rise of Asian nationalism and historians of India, China and Persia unraveled the structure and process of their ancient administrative systems, initiating comparative studies later. But the field is still not free from lingering prejudices and misinterpretations. This paper does not undertake a critical review of all this literature but focuses on the relevance of studying ancient bureaucracies for a deeper understanding of public administration and society in the current context of globalization. The analysis proceeds along the following lines:

A brief survey of Western academic approaches to the study of Asia and its ancient bureaucracies is provided, while highlighting their Euro-centrism and shortcomings, and analyzing critically the contributions of Max Weber and Karl Marx towards misunderstandings in this field.

Focus then is directed on the administrative systems of India and China, with their long continuous history, comparing their major features and changes over time. In particular, (a) the relation of scholars to rulers; (b) the changing social structures; and (c) exposure to foreign invasion, as the chief influences on bureaucratic structure and function, are discussed.

Comparisons are drawn to Europe, noting how the Roman Empire's achievement in administration and law was preserved by the Church after the decline and fall of the empire, and how the long intervening period witnessed societal changes before state bureaucracies took shape in the 18th century. During this period, Europe kept out Islamic invasions, shaped the feudal system, inaugurated a period of naval expansion and world conquest, and inaugurated the new economy of capitalism and industrialism, all without external interference. These societal transformations paved the way for the late development of European state bureaucracies with their differences from ancient bureaucracies.

A critical comparison of these bureaucracies in terms of their history, achievements and failures is offered, to garner important lessons about the relation of societal developments to bureaucracy, its character, and capacities for engineering or inhibiting economic changes. These lessons are valuable in the current context of globalization, in which the constraints of different historical legacies are ignored by governments and international institutions.

1. Western Misinterpretations

There was a long tradition in European scholarship of regarding all Asia as changeless, stagnant, and always subject to tyranny. This tradition started with Aristotle's characterization of non-Greeks as servile barbarians. It was enlarged and augmented over the centuries by Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Hegel and several others, and has influenced the best Western minds indirectly for centuries.

The discovery of Sanskrit literature, of Buddhist missionary conquest of the world, and the wonders of Hindu cave temples, created a small community of Indophile scholars in the nineteenth century but in no way altered the overall impression of Asia's political incapacity. As a result, later research revelations of Indian scholars of her republican tradition or Kautilya's Arthashastra were received with considerable distrust by several Western scholars—while Indian scholars retaliated with contempt. It is necessary to bear in mind this historical background to understand the limitations of western titans like Max Weber and Karl Marx on this theme.

1.1. Max Weber's Prebendal Bureaucracy

Weber dismissed all pre-eighteenth century bureaucracies as prebendal or patrimonial.

He regarded them as not fully developed and rational in terms of a number of characteristics he listed in his famous essay on bureaucracy. His “arithmetical” definition was misleading as it paid no attention to: (a) distinguishing between the more and less important characteristics; (b) the relation of each characteristic to its contemporary historical conditions; (c) the mutual relation between different characteristics; and (d) their intended function and actual results. Critics of Weber applied these criteria and have found some of his characteristics counterproductive or defective for modern bureaucracies. We may add that some ancient bureaucracies were quite effective, even when they did not meet some of Weber’s criteria.

Weber’s massive pioneering comparative work on *Economy and Society*, in spite of producing many insights, suffered from the poor state of contemporary research on Asia, his obsession with the birth of capitalism in Europe, and his lesser emphasis on other societal developments, such as the rise of “*gesellschaft*” single purpose associations displacing “*gemeinschaft*” natural communities, the study of which bore a closer relation to the evolution of bureaucracy. The overall effect of his approach led to the neglect of a critical and deeper study of ancient bureaucracies.

1.2. Karl Marx's Asiatic Mode of Production

Marx showed no direct interest in ancient bureaucracies; his later criticism of European bureaucracies of his time was not central to his work either. Nevertheless his marginal interest led to some misinterpretations in regard to Asian bureaucracies. He derived his ideas mostly from the long tradition of European thinking about unchanging Asia and Asiatic despotism, starting with Aristotle and running through Machiavelli and Montesquieu onto Hegel.

In his early correspondence with Engels, and for some years later, Marx’s view of AMP simply meant the absence of individual property in land and total ownership of it by the despotic ruler, and resultant stagnation for centuries. Somewhat later, after learning more about India’s communal villages, Marx included in his *Grundrisse* communal ownership of the soil of the village as an equivoque to the despotic sovereign’s ownership of the land. Later in his *Capital*, he stressed the royal ownership more strongly. Still later, in his informal interventions, in his correspondence with Engels and in his newspaper articles, he argued that the very existence of thousands of these village communities totally separated from one another formed the basis of despotic rule from above. As Perry Anderson argues, “no wholly consistent or systematic account of the Asiatic mode of production can be derived from their writings, because of the oscillations indicated above.”

However, a lot of literature has been produced by Marxist writers deriving inspiration from two of Marx’s concepts. His shift of emphasis, from the despotic state above to the self-sufficient village community, encouraged gradually the inclusion of all previous tribal and communal modes of production for comparison, watering down the concept. The other source of inspiration was Marx’s mating of public hydraulic works with the absence of private property in land, which led authors like Wittfogel to stretch the idea to identify state-managed hydraulic works as the basis of despotism, and the justification for a tentacular bureaucracy. Wittfogel’s work in particular has been

severely criticized as totally unsupported by facts.

All told, the literature on the Asiatic mode of production bears little relevance to bureaucracy. In regard to its discussion of economic evolution, the judgement of Perry Anderson that modern attempts to build a developed theory of the Asiatic mode of production from the scattered notes left by Marx and Engels, whether in the “communal-tribal” or “hydraulic-despotic” avenues of direction, are “essentially misguided” sounds appropriate.

Most Marxists were not concerned with bureaucracy as part of hydraulic despotism, but they dealt with it as part of the state machinery and as a class representative in their discussions of the state in the emerging capitalist society of the nineteenth century (see also the concluding section of this chapter.)

1.3. Eisenstadt's Bureaucratic Empires

More recently there has been a lot of empirical research and descriptive writing about specific ancient bureaucracies and some comparative studies too. Of these we need to discuss briefly S.N. Eisenstadt's comprehensive attempt at comparative analysis. His major contribution was to identify centralized bureaucratic empires as a distinct developed political system out of seven major systems, to be distinguished from the prebendal and patrimonial.

This is a clear break with Weber. Eisenstadt establishes with evidence the distinctiveness of this system in regard to its autonomous goals, free resources, and its control of other sectors of society. He deals in detail with bureaucracy and its possible orientations, of being either service oriented, or subordinate to the rulers, or relatively independent.

He also deals with its interactions with other sectors of society, and discusses the possible origins of the system from a patrimonial or feudal system, or from city states, and also its possible decay.

Eisenstadt's study is a clear advance on Weber and provides several insights and research openings. Its main defect, however, flows from its very comprehensiveness, and its methodology of correlating far too numerous variables for twenty-seven political systems of uneven size and periods. As a result, several correlations are weak and conditional, and the whole picture looks rather pale and blurred. But we may be thankful for its clear identification of the bureaucratic empire system, its characteristics, and its historical context.

The following pages are devoted to two major civilizations of Asia, namely of India and China, with their long continuous histories, pursuing different paths of political and bureaucratic development. This comparative socio-historical analysis yields more interesting insights and, together with a discussion of European developments in Section 5), we get a more consistent picture of the relations between the development of bureaucracy and socio-economic evolution in a civilization.

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Biographical Sketch

Prof. V. Subramaniam started his education in chemistry and moved over to Political Science and Public Administration. For a while he worked as a journalist before he became an academic, and taught and researched in the area of public administration in general. He was a noted comparativist who believed that a study of higher civil servants as a distinct social group ought to start with an understanding of their social and educational background and their attitudes.

He took his PhD from the Australian National University, Canberra. He was a Senior Fellow at the Manchester University, and lectured at the University of Queensland, the University of Western Australia and the University of Zambia. He also taught the Indian higher civil servants at the (Lal Bahadur Shastri) National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie, India. He twice won the Haldane Essay competition of the Royal Institute of Public Administration. Later part of his life was spent as Research Professor at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada. He was also a notable Buddhist scholar and composer of southern Indian music. He passed away in May 2004.