

Bureaucracy as Class Domination: Weber vs. Critical Theory*

This will be an appraisal of Weber's theory of bureaucracy from a critical theory point of view. As Robert Merton said, "Weber is almost exclusively concerned with what the bureaucratic structure attains: precision, reliability, efficiency. This same structure may be examined from another perspective . . . What are the limitations of the organization designed to attain these goals? (Merton, 1952, p. 364-365) I will try to answer Merton's question.

I will also be looking at bureaucracy, particular business organizations, as they are at the present time. Weber's analysis of bureaucracy appeared in 1922, although he had been working on it for several years. At that time world power relations, including those within the industrial countries, were different from today. At present (2014) the severe recession of 2007 is still lingering, and jobs have not

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recovered. Also world Communism, given its demise in Russia, has become considerably weaker, making the capitalist classes more self confident. They are more active and successful in the pursuit of economic interests. Weber had no way of knowing that capitalist bureaucracies would become this powerful. But even in his time, I think Weber gave an excessively positive picture of bureaucracy.

Preliminary ideas

Bureaucracy now exists not only in business concerns but also in government, churches, trade unions, armies and various other social aggregates. I will be concerned mainly with business, particularly capitalist firms. I will ask whether Weber's rather supportive description of capitalism and its

bureaucratic style was overly generous, both when he wrote it and, even more so, today -- a picture that needs to be balanced by one that captures the more unattractive features of business corporations. This will give us two ideal types of business bureaucracy, one favorable and the other much less so. As Randall Collins said, "ideal types have to be shaped so that they can be used in combination. They are something like tweezers, to grasp historical reality somewhere between different tendencies (1986, p. 34).

Weber himself did not compare his bureaucracy with the critical model. His major comparison was between bureaucracy and patrimonialism. Table 1 presents this comparison drawing on Reinhard Bendix's interpretation. (Bendix. 1962, pp. 424-425.)

<i>Bureaucracy</i>	<i>Patrimonialism</i>
Official business continuous	Business not continuous
Rules	No Written Rules
Hierarchy of Authority	No Formalized Authority

Personal property separate	All Property is Personal
Offices not owned	Officials are Servants
Written documents	Oral Communication

Table 1. Idea types of Bureaucracy and Patrimonialism

The difference between bureaucracy and patrimonialism (which I have presented quite sketchily) is of great historical importance. It is the “traditional vs. modern” relation, and it is quite positive toward bureaucracy. It is also the framework within which bureaucracy is usually discussed. In contrast this paper will compare the ideal type Weber used to describe bureaucracy with the one I have constructed from the various critiques of his ideas.

Another preliminary issue is the logical status of the ideal type (Kedar, 2007). Weber was vague about what he meant by ideal type, but I think this concept can best be understood as a directional or tendential one. An ideal type extrapolates a current historical or social tendency to what might be its endpoint, were it to continue down its present path. For example Weber thought history was tending toward rationalization and

bureaucratization. This is how he read the drift. In contrast, Marx thought history was tending toward increased class conflict. If the present paper is correct, though, both thinkers were right. For as I see it, bureaucratization is often a surreptitious form of class conflict, and it is leading toward unchecked bourgeois domination.

My argument does not need a precise definition of the ideal type other than the rough notion of tendency. If this term needs a pedigree it looks a lot like Aristotle's notion of the final cause, i.e. purposivity. But Aristotle thought of the final cause as both in nature and in the minds of human beings. In contrast I am using purposivity to apply (at times) to history itself.

In the background of this paper is Weber's complex conceptual apparatus concerning reason, rationality and rationalization (see Warner, 1972, and Kalberg, 1980 for classic statements). Since Weber did not always use these terms with precision, (Kalberg,, p. 1146) there is some flexibility in these concepts. Kalberg distinguished four

Weberian rationalities, of which I will use two: formal rationality and substantive rationality. Formal rationality is a relation in which the means is logically suitable for reaching the end. In his discussion of bureaucracy Weber talks of “calculability” as the dominating means-end relation.

Bureaucracy, Weber asserts, uses two measures of calculability: science and rules. But when Weber actually talks about the various features of bureaucracy he says little about science. His discussion of rules is also sometimes opaque, as his notion of regulation pervades the features of bureaucracy in a loose and often unspecified manner. For example, the first five traits of bureaucracy in my Table 2 are: impersonality, hierarchy, files, division of labor and credentials. These normative spheres all do partake of rules, although these rules are embedded in non-regulatory materials, such as impersonality and hierarchy.

Weber asserts that bureaucracy is based on calculability, and in that cognitive sphere one can find the predictability and precision of this form of organization. But in practice, bureaucracy is also based on a variety of folkways and practices that are calculable rules only in a vague sense. In

other words, in addition to science and rules, Weber sees bureaucracy as having considerable “social engineering,” by which I mean any practices that will extract obedience and conformity from workers

A second kind of rationality, substantive rationality, concerns the goal of the bureaucracy, i.e. that which all the steering and guiding is meant to reach. This kind of rationality concerns an end-in-itself. This end is the purpose or outcome which the means, i.e. the bureaucracy, are meant to attain. Weber is less than clear about substantive rationality, but Kalberg lists several examples. These are: friendship, Communism, feudalism, hedonism, egalitarianism, Calvinism, socialism, Buddhism, Hinduism, the Renaissance view of life and various notions of beauty (Kalberg, 1980, p. 1155). Obviously just about any value, including some evil ones, could be the goal or substantive rationality of a bureaucracy.

When Weber talks about the substantive rationality of capitalism he speaks about welfare, utilitarianism and the provisioning of a population. As he put it

Yet, if the standard used is that of the provision of a certain minimum of subsistence for the maximum size of population, the experience of the last few decades would seem to show that formal and substantive rationality coincide to a relatively high degree. (Weber, 1968, pp. 108-109).

It is possible to conceive of substantive rationality as meeting the needs of a population. But the business corporations themselves usually state their goal, unambiguously as one of maximizing profit. This is what stock-holders want and this is what they hear. If we take the goal of business bureaucracies, then, to be simply making money, the appraisal of the structural features and practices of a bureaucracy becomes much simpler. If the role of some bureaucratic trait is to appraised, one can simply use the standard of profitability. Of course the corporations must also obey the laws and they might also allow a small portion of their resources for good will, but apart from these considerations their substantive rationality is clearly the bottom line of

profitability. Weber was a bit evasive if not excessively kind in appraising the goal of capitalist bureaucracies.

To put it another way, the goal of business bureaucracy is an adversarial one. Maximizing profit means minimizing costs, including the costs of labor. One of the efficiency goals of business bureaucracy is to keep wages as low as possible. The various structural traits of these bureaucracies are aimed, not only at maximizing the product but at controlling labor. These bureaucracies have two faces: the one that pursues the famous precision-reliability-efficiency triad (Weber's face) and the one that controls and suppresses labor, including labor unions (the critical theory face). The manifest traits of both ideal types are the same, but when you unpack these traits and see how they work, they are virtually opposite in their impact on the class system.

Comparison of the two Ideal Types of Bureaucracy

Table 2 below lists ten traits of bureaucracy along with Weber's and my evaluations of each. I could have listed a

<i>Traits</i>	<i>Weber</i>	<i>Critical Theory</i>
Impersonality	Fairness	Depersonalization
Hierarchy	Clear lines of Authority	Obfuscation of Authority
Files	Information	Secrecy & Control
Division of Labor	Precision	Divides worker from each other

Credentials	Qualifications	Exclusion
Rules	Calculability	Oppression
Separation from Private resources	Honesty	Splitting of Personality
Jurisdiction	Clarity of Duties	Contradicted by Economic interests
Rewards & Punishments	Appropriate to the Activity	Punitive
Tenure	Secure life tenure	Insecurity

Table 2. Weberian vs. Critical Theory Evaluations of Bureaucratic Traits

greater or lesser number, since Weber does not give a crisp list of traits. He describes these features discursively, sometimes dividing traits into sub-traits, and it is to some extent arbitrary that I use the number ten. But I think this list is comprehensive enough and will give a valid test of my argument.

When I make these ten comparisons I will not be able to use a clear substantive rationality or ethic for both lists, but this will not hurt the argument. Weber's list, which he thinks

concerns the general welfare, should also be looked at from the standpoint of profitability. The critical theory list will draw on an ethic that is more sensitive to the needs of the employees and workers. Phrases like “freedom from want” (Franklin Delano Roosevelt) or “a living wage” (Papal social encyclicals) are in the background. Also the psychological and social needs of these bureaucratic populations must be considered.

1. *Impersonality.* The notion of impersonality has two meanings in this context. Socially it refers to even-handedness. This is what Weber had in mind when he attributed impersonality to bureaucracy. People are selected and rewarded, so it is claimed, not on the basis of such particularistic considerations as race, ethnicity and religion. They are evaluated on universalistic standards, which will be applied in the same way too all status and demographic groupings.

But impersonality also has the psychological meaning of interpersonal coldness. When organizations want to discourage unwanted clients, such as customer service callers or people complaining about a product, they sometimes answer their phones with tape recordings rather than “real

people.” This subjects the unwanted clients to a demeaning depersonalization making them less likely to consume the resources of the bureaucracy.

The first impersonality refers to fairness, and the second refers to callousness. The official bureaucracy may envision impersonality as fairness, but the actual workers and clients experience impersonality as alienating and psychologically painful. The fairness ethic easily glides into the coldness stance. Transcending particularism may mean ignoring the particularity or individuality of a given person. This in turn means treating them as an abstraction or non-person.

1. *Hierarchy*. Carl Dreyfuss made one of the strongest criticisms of hierarchy and related structures in *Occupation and Ideology of the Salaried Employee*, an analysis of white collar business organizations in 1930s Germany. In his view the use of authority hierarchy, elaborate division of labor and impersonality was largely unnecessary from a technical standpoint. Instead he regarded these as control devices, used to prevent the

employees from confronting the employers as a united group.

As he put it, “The employer is fundamentally interested in preventing the employees of his enterprise from confronting him as a homogeneous group. He attempts to undermine and split their strength through minute subdivision and differentiation.” (Dreyfuss, p. 259.)

3. Files.

The standard argument against the functionality of the files is that they stand in the way of service. Asking something from a business, whether as an employee or as a client, usually requires filling out forms, often quite lengthy and exacting ones. This so called “red tape” may well discourage people from engaging with bureaucracies. In Gouldner’s research of a corporate sample the main complaints against the files were that completing forms was unnecessary, time consuming and often the invasion of privacy.

A related complaint was that instead of going right to someone who could give you a definite answer “You first had

to go before the powerless people . . . who though they may be able to deny your request, are unable to approve it finally. They can say, 'no' but not 'yes.' Power centers are felt to be out of reach and the individual experiences himself and those with whom he can have some face to face contact as powerless.” (Gouldner, 1952, p. 415.)

4. Division of Labor.

Peter Drucker challenged the necessity of the typical factory division of labor by pointing out that in many World War II factories it was impossible to break down tasks in the usual assembly line fashion, and that, with this decreased division of labor many unskilled workers did relatively complex, skilled tasks. That they did them as reliably and skillfully as had previously been done by skilled workers, suggests that the division of labor may not always be simply an efficiency device.

Commenting on this finding, Drucker said:

One conclusion from these experiences is that management should consciously try to encourage the worker's natural tendency to work as a team. And the team should have joint responsibility for such matters as

the actual division of work, the arrangement of rest periods and “days off,” etc. (Drucker, 1946, p. 392.)

5. *Credential Barriers.*

Another bureaucratic process is that of testing, setting qualifications, forming educational standards and constantly upgrading these standards -- all of which is supposed to maximize the expertise of the bureaucratic worker or official (Collins. 1979). These credential barriers are controversial, and it is difficult to distinguish the outright arbitrary and discriminatory elements from the elements that are requisite solely because of the self-fulfilling prophesy, and from the elements that are actually needed on technically objective grounds.

Credential barriers have two important consequences for our purposes. They arbitrarily divide and create artificial conflicts of interest among groups of workers. At the present time the most glaring example of this division is that between white and black workers in the United States, for credential barriers prevent many black workers from entering the better-paid industries at all. A second important consequence is that many talented workers and

foreman are blocked from the good managerial jobs because of lack of a college degree, a credential which is certainly an artificial one in many cases, and which has the effect of being class discriminatory

6. Rules.

A direct command can be negotiated, argued with and even disobeyed. Commands are a face-to-face or person to person encounter, for example, between a worker and the foreman. But if the command is buried in a rule, the whole power relation changes. Now the foreman need not lay his ego on the line by directly ordering the worker. The foreman can simply say “this is the rule, and you have to follow it.” Or even, “I don’t make the rules.”

In other words rules are frequently a political device for obscuring the process of authority and universalizing what is really an ordinary concrete power relationship. Anyone who has raised children knows it is easier to enforce “rules of the house” than specific commands to children. Bureaucratic rules, too, often hide concrete, arguable demands inside of universal, fair-sounding imperatives

7. Separation of business resources from private resources.

In the case of ordinary employees, there is littler chance of appropriating organizational resources, except perhaps pencils and erasers. Executives have much better chances of appropriating the corporation's resources. To begin with, their own salaries and fringe benefits can be quite high. Stock options and similar non-salary remuneration can also be significant. And such border-line actions as using inside information to launch lucrative business deals can entail large sums of money. Actual stealing, such as embezzlement, has serious risks if bookkeeping is monitored in a normal way, but it is not unheard of.

In other words the higher up you are in a business bureaucracy the greater your chances of manipulating your pay and fringe benefits. There might be an official or formal separation between the organization's money and that of the employees, but there are so many ways of influencing remuneration, that the boundary between the two kinds of money becomes more porous as you move toward the top.

8. Clarity of Jurisdictional Areas.

Jurisdictional areas are the rights and duties of bureaucratic officials. I have already mentioned various ways in which jurisdictional structure is arranged to obfuscate class consciousness. In general the creation of unnecessary levels of authority obscures the fundamentally bi-polar relation between workers and management.

Morris Rosenberg (1953) argued that the structure of large-scale industry has the effect of blurring class consciousness. The tendency to see the immediate superior, perhaps the foreman, as the major cause of grievances on the job; the difficulty that people of different tasks have in seeing common economic interests; the tendency of low-level white collar people, who interact with higher management, to see their interests as being the same as those of higher management -- these "perceptual obstacles to class consciousness," as Rosenberg put it, all result from the structure of bureaucracy.

9. Rewards and Punishments.

Weber thought that rewards, particularly income, was reasonably apportioned in bureaucracy to secure maximum motivation and effort from employees. This was a questionable assertion, even in Weber's time. Trade unions have always disputed this claim.

But in recent years rewards have become even more of a problem. In the capitalist countries, particularly the United States, worker's incomes have stalled, whereas those of the highest income levels have grown to an unprecedented extent. At the present time the top one percent of incomes in the United States gets twenty percent of the income. In addition jobs have not recovered in the present recession and more and more jobs are getting automated. This means the top income classes have been rewarded, and the bottom income classes have been punished

10. Tenure.

Even in Weber's time job tenure was by no means secure for life, though the managerial classes in some bureaucracies may have enjoyed something resembling lifetime tenure. Job security for industrial workers has depended heavily on the protection of trade unions, and in the last 40 years the power of trade unions in industrial countries, particularly the United States, has declined

considerably. Accordingly the job security of manual workers has become weaker.

A major model of job tenure is that of University professors and public school teachers. The extent to which tenure prevails for them has lessened in recent years, and there is constant talk about eliminating educational tenure entirely. As educational tenure weakens, the tenure of workers in all business bureaucracies has been weakening.

De-bureaucratization.

In addition to looking at the power-effects of specific bureaucratic elements one can find support for our argument in the process of de-bureaucratization. There are classic cases of bureaucracies which, when faced with a critical test of effectiveness, shed their formality and develop a looser, presumably more adaptive structure. This is true of military organizations when they shift from peacetime hyper-organization to a wartime fighting stance. Similarly the front-line units are less bureaucratic than the rear. The same change has been observed of large service bureaucracies during such public emergencies as tornadoes and floods. Sometimes within a single organization those units of workers who can resist bureaucratization will do so, for example miners are (or were, before mining automation) less bureaucratized than factory workers in the same corporation (Gouldner's case), and night shift workers are regularly less bureaucratized than day workers.

In commenting on cases such as these, Blau and Scott (themselves following a suggestion in a paper by Katz and Eisenstadt) observe that:

Katz and Eisenstadt suggest that the common elements in these situations are the presence of physical danger and the isolation of the unit from the larger organization. Both of these conditions make superiors in some respects dependent on their subordinates, and their dependence restrains them from using authoritarian or coercive measures in performing their duties and to rely, instead, on more personal, non-bureaucratic means of motivating cooperative effort. (Blau and Scott. 2003. p. 232).

Conclusion.

I have now reviewed Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy, especially business bureaucracy. Weber's ideal type looks good when it is compared to that of patrimonialism. But when compared to that of critical theory it is less impressive. I have concentrated on business bureaucracies, pretty much ignoring the other kinds. Therefore my analysis and conclusions apply mainly to business, although they probably also have some relevance to the other bureaucracies.

In recent years it is clear that business bureaucracies are generating increasingly serious problems for society. Inequality of incomes is continuing to rise, as I pointed out. This enhances the life chances of the income elite and diminished those of the workers. I suggested that this increasing inequality is at least partially due to the fall of Communism in Russia, which seems to have emboldened the American rich. Inequality of income and wealth is also diminishing the quality of life, particularly in the public sphere. In addition inequality is creating a problem with the business cycle. The rich do not spend as much of their incomes as the ordinary working population does. As a result of this worsening under-consumption it looks as though business setbacks, including the most recent one, are becoming more severe. Weber did not build the business cycle into his ideal type, but it is clearly an important factor in the health of business bureaucracies. An additional problem is that automation is removing jobs, a trend that looks like it will continue and create a huge problem for capitalism. Finally the concentration of income and wealth grates against democracy. Economic inequality tends to become political inequality.

Weber is one of the great geniuses, perhaps *the* genius, in social theory. But his description of bureaucracy, particularly business bureaucracy, was always excessively flattering. Of course it is the nature of the ideal type to be exaggerated. But in recent decades his

picture has become even more one-sided. My conclusion is that the critical ideal type of business bureaucracies, which is a correction to Weber's view, should be given more attention.

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