

Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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PART III
WEBER

I. Bureaucracy

"Bureaucracy is a giant mechanism operated by pygmies." – Balzac

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, a collection of Weber's writings on economy and society, first published after his death in 1921. Parts were translated into English and published as *The Theory of Social and Economic Organizations* in 1947 by Talcott Parsons. In 1968 a complete English translation was made by Roth and Wittich, under the title *Economy and Society*. This translation has been reprinted and is the primary source in English today. Parts of the work also found themselves into Runciman's *Weber: Selected Passages*, published in 1978.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

This selection is a short piece, in outline form, defining and describing the characteristics of bureaucracy, one of the three legitimating forms of authority. For more on legitimization, read *Politics as a Vocation*. Think about the institutional connections between bureaucratic authority and rational-formal law, and how both work together to support rational Western capitalism.

Part 3, Chapter 6, Section 7. Bureaucracy

Characteristics of Bureaucracy

MODERN officialdom functions in the following manner:

I. Fixed and official jurisdictional areas generally ordered by rules (laws or administrative regulations).

1. The regular activities required for the purposes of the bureaucratically governed structure are distributed in a fixed way as official duties.
2. The authority to give the commands required for the discharge of these duties is distributed in a stable way and is strictly delimited by rules concerning the coercive means, physical, symbolic, or otherwise, which may be placed at the disposal of officials.
3. Methodical provision is made for the regular and continuous fulfillment of these duties and for the execution of the corresponding rights; only persons who have the generally regulated qualifications to serve are employed.

In public and lawful government these three elements constitute 'bureaucratic authority.' In private economic domination, they constitute bureaucratic 'management.' Bureaucracy, thus understood, is fully developed in political and ecclesiastical communities only in the modern state, and, in the private economy,

only in the most advanced institutions of capitalism. Permanent and public office authority, with fixed jurisdiction, is not the historical rule but rather the exception. This is so even in large political structures such as those of the ancient Orient, the Germanic and Mongolian empires of conquest, or of many feudal structures of state. In all these cases, the ruler executes the most important measures through personal trustees, companions, or court-servants. Their commissions and authority are not precisely delimited and are temporarily called into being for each case.

II. The principles of office hierarchy and of levels of graded authority mean a firmly ordered system of super- and subordination in which there is a supervision of the lower offices by the higher ones. Such a system offers the governed the possibility of appealing the decision of a lower office to its higher authority, in a definitely regulated manner. With the full development of the bureaucratic type, the office hierarchy is monocratically organized. The principle of hierarchical office authority is found in all bureaucratic structures: in state and ecclesiastical structures as well as in large party organizations and private enterprises. It does not matter for the character of bureaucracy whether its authority is called 'private' or 'public.'

When the principle of jurisdictional 'competency' is fully carried through, hierarchical subordination—at least in public office—does not mean that the 'higher' authority is simply authorized to take over the business of the 'lower.' Indeed, the opposite is the rule. Once established and having fulfilled its task, an office tends to continue in existence and be held by another incumbent.

III. The management of the modern office is based upon written documents ('files' or 'records'), which are preserved in their original or draft form. There is, therefore, a staff of subaltern officials and scribes of all sorts. The body of officials actively engaged in a 'public' office, along with the respective apparatus of material implements and the files, make up a 'bureau.' In private enterprise, 'the bureau' is often called 'the office.'

In principle, the modern organization of the civil service separates the bureau from the private residence of the official, and, in general, bureaucracy segregates official activity as something distinct from the sphere of private life. Public money and equipment are divorced from the private property of the official. This condition is everywhere the product of a long development. Nowadays, it is found in public as well as in private enterprises; in the latter, the principle extends even to the leading entrepreneur. In principle, the executive office is separated from the household, business from private correspondence, and business assets from private fortunes. The more consistently the modern type of business management has been carried through the more are these separations the case. The beginnings of this process are to be found as early as the Middle Ages.

It is the peculiarity of the modern entrepreneur that she conducts herself as the 'first official' of her enterprise, in the very same way in which the ruler of a specifically modern bureaucratic state spoke of herself as 'the first servant' of the state. The idea that the bureau activities of the state are intrinsically different in character from the management of private economic offices is a continental European notion and, by way of contrast, is totally foreign to the American way.

IV. Office management, at least all specialized office management— and such management is distinctly modern—usually presupposes thorough and expert training. This increasingly holds for the modern executive and employee of private enterprises, in the same manner as it holds for the state official.

V. When the office is fully developed, official activity demands the full working capacity of the official, irrespective of the fact that his obligatory time in the bureau may be firmly delimited. In the normal case, this is only the product of a long development, in the public as well as in the private office. Formerly, in all cases, the normal state of affairs was reversed: official business was discharged as a secondary activity.

VI. The management of the office follows general rules, more or less stable, more or less exhaustive, which can be learned. Knowledge of these rules represents a special technical learning which the officials possess. It involves jurisprudence, or administrative or business management.

The reduction of modern office management to rules is deeply embedded in its very nature. The theory of modern public administration, for instance, assumes that the authority to order certain matters by decree—which has been legally granted to public authorities—does not entitle the bureau to regulate the matter by commands given for each case, but only to regulate the matter abstractly. This stands in extreme contrast to the regulation of all relationships through individual privileges and bestowals of favor, which is absolutely dominant in patrimonialism, at least in so far as such relationships are not fixed by sacred tradition.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. Look up the etymology of bureaucracy. What are its roots? Synonyms? Make a short list of modern bureaucracies and compare their elements to those described by Weber.
2. Come up with a shorthand definition of the three elements that constitute bureaucratic authority. Try to do this creatively, as a three-word motto, for example.
3. What is the difference between bureaucratic authority and bureaucratic management? Having read about legitimating forms of authority in *Politics as a Vocation*, why do you think Weber makes this distinction here?
4. In point V, Weber makes the point that, historically, the official's duties were "secondary" while now official activity demands the "full working capacity" of the official. What does he mean here? Who were officials in the time when their official work was secondary? Who are they now? (you might want to read along the discussion in *Politics as a Vocation*).
5. What is professional training for the modern official? How is this different from other officials (those found in traditional or charismatic authority structures, for example? Or private household enterprise during the Middle Ages?)

Concepts

Bureaucracy