

### **Literature Review: Bureaucracy from 1920 to Present**

Today, the term “bureaucracy” is resoundingly negative. In the primetime show “The Office,” socially awkward misfits preen and bicker. In the movie *Office Space*, authoritarian upper managers terrorize employees with regulations and performance reviews seemingly for giggles. And in the long-running comic strip, *Blondie*, a lazy pencil pusher naps at his desk while his short-statured, balding boss throws tantrums about files and deadlines. The negative perception extends past stereotypes in fiction; none of the examples of usage in Merriam-Webster’s dictionary are sympathetic. “She was fed up with all the red tape and bureaucracy.” “Both candidates pledge to simplify the state’s bloated bureaucracy.” And “...A small but outspoken chorus of former CIA case officers has portrayed the once proudly swashbuckling agency as a timid, politically correct bureaucracy, overly concerned with being held to account by the press and Capitol Hill.”

Though bureaucracy is unpopular, it has persisted as the standard organizational structure in modern business and government. This paper reviews perceptions of bureaucracy from its formal inception in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Ironically, the modern concept of bureaucracy was developed by a German sociologist in the early 1900s, when its ideological opposite (but practical application), communism, was beginning to dominate the Northeastern hemisphere. In 1920, Max Weber published *The theory of social and economic organizations*. In this title, rarely left out of the bibliographies of publications on management, Weber champions rationality as the core of an efficient organization. And bureaucracy, “other things being equal, always, from a formal, technical point

of view, [is] the most rational type...The choice is only that between bureaucracy and dilettantism in the field of administration” (p. 337).

According to Weber, in any group, whether profit-oriented or otherwise, the key element of cohesion is “social order.” He asserts that this order is established by legitimate authority, without which no group can function: “Whether or not a corporate group exists is entirely a matter of the presence of a person of authority” (p. 146). The authority is responsible for laying out a clear set of rules for individuals within the group to follow, applying discipline to cultivate “uncritical and unresisting mass obedience” (p. 153). The authority is also responsible for enforcing an organizational structure in which labor is divided absolutely: “Every type of social action in a group which is oriented to economic considerations...[involves] a particular mode of division and organization of human services in the interest of production” (p. 218).

Communication flows only downwards from the authority to his subordinates, for “differing opinions and shifting majorities” dilute the rationality and efficiency of decision-making.

The strictest definition of Weberian bureaucracy was embraced by some writers and most organizations in the early-to-mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. The book *Social theory and social structure*, published in 1957 by Robert King Merton, is essentially a tribute to Weber’s works. He advocates for hierarchy, established rules, and meritocracy in the workplace: “The ideal type of formal organization is bureaucracy...A system of differentiated controls and sanctions is stated in the regulations. The assignment of roles occurs on the basis of technical qualifications which are ascertained through formalized, impersonal procedures (*e.g.* examinations).” Merton also stresses depersonalization in a bureaucratic organization: “Authority, the power of control which derives from an acknowledged status, inheres in the office and not in the particular person who performs the official role” (p. 249). This depersonalization was of key importance in government agencies,

in which personal relationships and opinions were considered inappropriate. Woodrow Wilson, president of the United States from 1913 to 1921, wrote that, “Bureaucracy can exist only where the whole service of the state is removed from the common political life of the people, its chiefs as well as its rank and file.”

With the establishment of the modern middle class and new standards of production after World War II, the term “bureaucracy” developed a negative connotation. Victor Thompson, in the 1965 study *Bureaucracy and innovation*, demonstrated that “the bureaucratic form of organization is characterized by high productive efficiency but low innovative capacity.” He recommended loosening the organizational structure and freeing communications to foster creativity. Warren Bennis, in the 1965 article “The decline of bureaucracy and organizations of the future,” states, “It is my premise that the bureaucratic form of organization is becoming less and less effective; that it is hopelessly out of joint with contemporary realities.” He described a bureaucratic world ridden with injustice, and predicted that within 25-50 years, a new “organic-adaptive” (temporary and rapidly evolving) organizational structure would replace it.

Bennis’ predictions had not come to fruition by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as evidenced by Kathy Ferguson’s delivery of an especially scathing critique in *Feminist case against bureaucracy* (1985). Ferguson asserts that the premise of bureaucracy is inherently masculine, as it encourages the domination of subordinates and the repression of emotion in the workplace. She found the depersonalization aspect central to the Weberian model especially corrupting, stating, “People whose lives and work are ordered bureaucratically experience both the unconnectedness [*sic*] and the unfreedom [*sic*] of ‘anonymous social relations’...Relations among members of a bureaucracy are impersonal and rule-governed.” (p. 12). She claims that “humane and quasi-democratic” treatment of subordinates is discouraged in these power-oriented

structures, and blames the bureaucratization of businesses and government agencies for the dehumanization of society at large.

Yet, some late 20<sup>th</sup> century authors defended bureaucracy despite its decline in popularity. In 1990, *Harvard Business Review* printed an article by Elliott Jaques titled, “In Praise of Hierarchy.” Jaques begins by admitting that “Bureaucracy is a dirty word even among bureaucrats, and in business there is a widespread view that managerial hierarchy kills initiative, crushes creativity, and has therefore seen its day.” However, he believes the hierarchical organization of bureaucracy “[preserves] unambiguous accountability” for the work done (or not done). He also argues that hierarchy is the only structure to adequately address the complexity of tasks within very large organizations. In 1997, Robert Sanders’ article “The Future of Bureaucracy” began with similar self-effacing statements: “Whether liberal or conservative...teenager or octogenarian, all of us can agree on one thing: Bureaucracy is bad.” He acknowledges the commonly perceived problems involved with inflexible hierarchies, depersonalization, and seemingly obsolete rules. However, he argues that middle managers are necessary “buffers” between the potentially conflicting interests of different segments of an organization, and that complicated procedures that appear meaningless on paper often have unforeseen uses. When faced with a novel or difficult situation, he says, “Inadequate or silly rules are better than no rules.” He also concludes that depersonalization need not degrade into dehumanization: “The fact that an organization must be impersonal in order to avoid inconsistencies and conflicts of interest does not mean that we should behave as mechanical, uncaring parts of an inhuman machine.”

Given the status of bureaucracy in today’s popular culture, literature published within the last few years is surprisingly supportive. In 2008, an article in *Canadian Public Administration*

by Peter Aucoin stated, “Bureaucracy will survive into and in the twenty-first century...because the bureaucratic model is essential to good public management.” Aucoin argues that hierarchies make responsibilities clear, that specialization “secures competence,” and standardization assures the “best practices for achieving results.” In 2009, Brocklehurst, Grey & Sturdy tracked the status of managers over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, illustrating bureaucracy’s decline in public opinion. Their study of 45 MBA students showed that many modern managers are unwilling to describe themselves as such or to acknowledge their role in organizational hierarchies. However, though the students reject the identity of ‘manager’ on the surface, they simply replaced the role with different rhetoric like “project leadership...This provided a way to square the circle of rejecting management while still acknowledging the continued existence of hierarchy.” In essence, “the *idea* of bureaucracy” is condemned, though the structure remains. Finally, in 2010 O’Toole and Meier wrote “In Defense of Bureaucracy,” a study of the efficacy of bureaucratic structure in difficult economic times. The authors concluded that traditional managers have the capacity to minimize performance declines “when faced with significant budgetary shocks.” The condemnation of bureaucracy is short-sighted, they argue, because the existing structure allows governments to “respond to problems as they occur.”

Throughout the literature, a tension between popular opinion and business theory is apparent. Early writers embraced Weberian bureaucracy entirely, while comic strip artists and novelists railed against it. The most heated attacks on bureaucracy peaked in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and while TV characters liken bureaucrats to court jesters, modern writers tend to suggest modifications rather than obliteration. A general consensus has been reached, though, that despite popular disapproval bureaucracy is still relevant as a basic organizational structure. It

will probably persist well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in both commercial businesses and governments across the increasingly Westernized world.

## References

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