Public life and late capitalism

somehow express the essence of bureaucratic reality, Weber's ideal-typical
discussion of bureaucracy leaves itself permanently open to further interrogation
and supersession. This discussion unavoidably provokes novel questions (about
other limitations of bureaucratic organization, for example) that it has failed to
address or even anticipate.

Weber's lack of concern with such questions was again consistent with his thesis
that only certain dimensions of any infinitely complex and changing reality are
ever worth knowing—specifically, those to which is attributed "a general cultural
significance." This presupposition, however, provokes the standard retort:
significance for whom? This retort suggests the presence of a self-destructive
weakness within Weber's defense of the imperative of bureaucracy. When it is
considered that the concept of rational bureaucracy was a solecism in the lan-
guage of nineteenth-century theoretical discussion, it is curious indeed that
Weber took for granted that his account of bureaucracy was somehow expres-
see the value interests of his time. This confident presumption, which suppressed
a whole century of theoretical controversy and political and social struggle over
bureaucracy, was arguable reinforced by his reliance upon an inverted evolu-
tionism. The resulting comparisons of the present, ancient Egypt, and Rome in
its decline; commentaries upon the "forward progress" of bureaucratic mech-
mechanization; exhortations to abandon false hopes—their and other claims provide
hinds that Weber's ideal-typical defense of bureaucracy sustained itself on pri-
tacit, and pessimistic assumptions about the regressive character of the contem-
porary phase of the world historical process.

These assertions are contradicted, however, by Weber's other thesis that
the points of view from which processes of bureaucratization become objects
of inquiry cannot be fixed indefinitely. This indeterminacy thesis contains an
important implication: so long as these processes of bureaucratization change,
its must be admitted that new "facts," problematics, and interpretations concerns
these processes will come to be deemed important. This admission is of
decisive importance under late capitalist conditions, precisely because bureau-
cracy is widely criticized and opposed as undemocratic (see Essay I). From the
vantage point of such struggles for autonomous public life, it becomes evident,
indeed, that Weber's theses are heavily committed to the defense of bureaucratic
organization. Weber arrogantly presumed the redundancy of further questions
about bureaucratic domination. He took it for granted, conversely, that the
repression of autonomous public life was more and more necessary. These pres-
sumptions form the legacy of his account of bureaucracy, an account that func-
tions to silence further discussion about the authoritarian, self-contradictory,
and therefore contingent qualities of all bureaucracy.

There are at least three interrelated instances of this silencing effect. In the
first place, and most obviously, Weber considerably overestimated the technical
efficiency of both "public" and "private" bureaucratic organization. It will be
recalled that he considered that the restless advance of bureaucratic organization
was a consequence of its technical superiority. By virtue of its speed, precision,
cost efficiency, unambiguity, and hierarchical unity, only bureaucracy is able to
tope adequately and efficiently with the complexities of modern life. This ideal-
typical valuation (as Essay 3 argues at length) fails to consider a number of
chronically inefficient, that is, technically irrational, aspects of the bureaucratic
form. Two of these aspects can here be mentioned. First, Weber failed to analyze
sufficiently the extent to which the horizontal or lateral relations among different
bureaucratic organizations would continually generate turbulence within and
between the spheres of civil society and the state. This is a curious oversight,
insomuch as one of his key defenses of modern capitalism concerns its capacity
to secure the differentiation of social and political bureaucracies. He thus ac-
nowledged that the logic of operation, means of financing, and goals of capitalist
enterprises were by no means identical with those of state administration. He
noted, for example, that the substance of state policy may frequently be oriented
to noneconomic ends, which thereby limit the capitalist, rational, calculating
pursuit of profit. He also understood that modern capitalist processes of bureau-
cratization have consistently been marked by unevenness.

These insights could never have been systematically developed by Weber,
precisely because they would have seriously jeopardized his claims on behalf of
the formally rational character of bureaucratic administration. It is in part be-
cause public and private bureaucracies cannot automatically or bureaucratically
coordinate their relations with one another that their respective intermingle
modes of operation are systematically prevented from achieving a mechanistic
competence. Under continuous pressure to act with or against other (corporate,
church, trade union, state) bureaucracies within their often uncertain and always
changing goals in increasingly complex and conflict-ridden environments, bureaucratizations are
typically forced to undermine their own principal rejection of doing business
on a case-by-case basis by engaging in judgment calls, decisions made without
the benefits of fixed, objective rules that can be applied with precision. In a
continuously uncertain and often turbulent environment, the stable attainment
of organizational objectives depends on continuous changes in the bureaucratic
structure itself. This means that under late capitalist conditions, "without reg-
ard for particular persons and situations" is an unrealizable watchword of all
bureaucracies. They cannot self-consistently attain their respective goals through
reliance upon abstract-regional regulations, which are applied exhaustively and
consistently to every case. Indeed, bureaucratic organizations that attempt to
monitor and control all situations strictly through such formally rational regu-
lations are continually subject to heterogeneous rivalries and struggles that in
turn, have internal disorganizing effects upon those organizations. Conversely,
the persistence of such struggles and rivalries obstructs the formal rationaliza-
tion of social and political life. Processes of bureaucratization display a definite
unevenness or lack of uniformity. They are therefore also marked by continual
efforts to readjust, reorganize, and redeploy their systems of command—through,
for example, corporatist forms of policy making and bargaining between bu-
cracratic organizations. Bureaucracies do not necessarily display constant pres-
sures toward caution and "playing it safe," a stifling and pedantic suspicion of
experimentation and departure from the usual routine. Under late capitalist
conditions, everyday life is bureaucratized to different degrees and from incom-
patible and often contradictory points of view.
Bureaucratic administration, as Marx already stressed (and as Weber sometimes recognized), tends to be an administration of secret sessions. Bureaucratic hierarchy is a hierarchy of knowledge, information, and liaison behind closed doors. One of its supreme resources of power lies in its capacity to transform specialized and official knowledge into official secrets, classified material, and professional expertise.

No doubt, this list could be expanded considerably. These examples nevertheless suffice to illustrate the more general thesis: Bureaucracies, contrary to Weber's account, persistently undermine their own claim to competence in discharging their business economically and efficiently in accordance with formally rational rules. Bureaucratic organizations cannot be unifiably neutral, as if they could place themselves at the disposal of every power that skillfully claims their precise service.

This thesis is of course well noted and widely sensed. It nevertheless is the carrier of a less frequently recognized political implication. Simply expressed, Weber's overestimation of the degree to which both public and private bureaucracies can and do operate in accordance with strict, formally rational rules directly jeopardizes his claim that the participation of citizens within autonomous forms of public life has become highly dysfunctional for efficient bureaucratic administration and must therefore be minimized. It is true, or so Weber argued, that the modern struggle for constitutional democratic government - for a political system that acknowledges the formal political equality of all citizens - has everywhere only partially fostered the growth of bureaucratic administration. Modern mass democracies typically take the form of bureaucratised democracies. Such demands as equality before the law and equal rights of the governed accelerated the destruction of old forms of privilege, especially that based on birth. These demands have nevertheless promoted, within the sphere of the state at least, the advance of bureaucratic administration against the localized rule of notables. The pacification of the governed through systems of bureaucratic organization - what Weber called "passive democratization" - is an unintended but nonetheless direct consequence of the popular struggle for mass, representative democracy.

Weber nevertheless proposed that this tacit alliance between bureaucracy and representative democracy is marked by unanticipated consequences. In spite of their former support for the bureaucratization process, demands for democracy more and more often turn against the rule of bureaucracy. In Weber's (not inaccurate) view, continuing struggles to realize the more substantive principles associated with formal, representative democracy are in definite contradiction to the rule of bureaucracy and its penchant for authoritarian command, sectary, and the silencing of criticism. Demands for the universal accessibility to office and the popular election and recall of administrators and subordinate staff also directly endanger the precise functioning of the bureaucratic mechanism. Weber therefore concluded that the struggle for democratic, public life (whether in the sphere of the economy or in that of the state) would produce "technically irrational obstacles" to the smooth formulation and deployment of bureaucratic commands. In his view, this antinomy between bureaucracy and autonomous
public life could be attenuated through plebiscitarianism. Systems of plebiscitarian leader democracy, he proposed, would facilitate the emergence of genuine political leaders who could act as both free trustees of the masses and, at the same time, their virtually unrestrained masters. Weber's proposal appears highly implausible in view of his persistent overestimation of the technical competence of bureaucratic organizations. Indeed, given their substantively irrational effects (discussed by Weber) and their chronic technical incompetence under fate capitalist conditions, his case against democratic, public life remains considerably weakened, even unwarranted.

This tentative conclusion is considerably strengthened by a second immanent weakness within Weber's ideal-typical account of bureaucracy. This second difficulty is not unrelated to the first, and might indeed be analyzed as its extension. Weber's account, it must be said, radically understated the capacity of the "lifeless machinery" of bureaucratic administration to catalyze new demands for public action. Hierarchically ordered relations of command and obedience are no doubt typical features of all contemporary bureaucratic organizations. These organizations plunge their roots deeply into all interpersonal relations; they have in common, as Weber suggested, the important characteristic of permanence. They tend to be institutions of everyday routine (Ablagegebilde). Within the bureaucratic apparatus, however, individuals and groups are rarely depoliticized cogs in a dynamic and precisely functioning mechanism. The helpless frustration of the dominated is not the inevitable and nightmarish effect of the impenetrable formalism and officiousness of bureaucratic command. Bureaucratic administration is everywhere at all times the outcome of class struggles (as Lukács narrowly insisted against Weber), but also of various power struggles outside the sphere of the factory and office. In addition to effecting the restructuring and redirection of the operation of these organizations, these struggles also produce conditions in which informal public spheres of argument, deliberation, and decision making tend to thrive.

Weber of course insisted that conflict could not be excluded from social and political life. The means, ends, and "bearers" of conflict may well be contingent, though conflict itself could never be permanently abolished. Guided by this axiom, he acutely aware that the modern process of bureaucratization was highly conflict-ridden. With respect to the past, to mention two examples noted by Weber, modernization provoked both the bloody resistance of the American planters' aristocracy to urban capital and, in Europe, the struggle of traditional, rural-based power blocs (such as the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches) against the spread of urban rationalism. In the here and now, Weber's participation in the Verein für Sozialpolitik survey of the industrial labor process

* From the viewpoint of the following argument, it is of great interest that such struggles are never analyzed in any depth or systematized by Weber. His account of the bureaucratization process, it will be argued subsequently, seriously understimates the constitutive role played by various collective protest movements in the modernization process— a role whose history has yet to be written. These collective protest movements formed part of a process by which modern, bureaucratic societies were created, challenged, and

alerted him to forms of worker resistance to bureaucratized work. Concerning the future, Weber also speculated on the extent to which conflict would likely be an endemic feature of planned socialist economies administered dictatorially from above. This bureaucratic, state authoritarianism would probably effect a proliferation of (violent) power struggles, strikes over working conditions, boycotts, and the forcible dismissal of unpopular supervisors.

Precisely as a consequence of his ideal-typical preference for analyzing bureaucracies as stable systems of command and obedience, Weber unfortunately never pursued these suggestions. Further reflection suggests that this preference was strongly reinforced by his confident presumption that, under contemporary capitalist conditions, bureaucratic organizations would induce among the governed a settled orientation for sticking unhappily to rules and regulations. He took it for granted that very few are destined to live for politics as active, publicly involved citizens. It seemed obvious to Weber, the democratic elitist, that "a relatively small number of people are primarily interested in political life and hence interested in sharing political power." Everywhere the law of the small number—the superior political maneuverability of small leading groups—determines political and social activity. Only a few strive to live off the state by making organized politics a permanent source of interest and income. Always and everywhere, politics is for most people naturally an avocation.

This conviction that the great mass of citizens can only be the objects of solicitation by bureaucratic ruling groups was supported by various—and highly conflicting—observations. On occasion (without further argument, and mostly with reference to the charisma of the ancient Judaic prophets), Weber assumed that officials and others submit easily to the appeals of demagogic leaders and their causes. This predisposition to voluntary servitude would be considerably encouraged by the capacity of charismatic leaders to create a willingness of others to follow them unconditionally: "Inwardly it is per se more satisfying to work for a leader." Elsewhere (in language reminiscent of the ancients), he observed that efforts to institute the "old type" of direct, participatory democracy (such as that attempted in the Swiss cantons) always degenerate into aristocratic outcomes. Political involvement, he insisted, is always contingent upon a release

redirected. Such protest has sometimes taken the form of countercultures (e.g., Taborite millenarianism, the English Ranters, Romanticism, the communal movements), which reactively opposed the artificiality of bureaucratization with their own allegedly natural, spontaneous, and highly affective forms of life. At other times, this collective protest has been organized around political movements (e.g., those of Calvinists, radical liberals, workers, women, rural populists, anti-colonials, regional separatists) that sought a share of state or social power, or its decentralization. Throughout earlier phases of modernity, these countercultural and political movements were typically fragmented (i.e., at odds with themselves) and usually subject to wide geographic variation. As marginalized movements, they were unable fully to control, arrest, and redploy the processes of bureaucratization. They were therefore subjected to violent suppression, integration, or processes of internal decay and self-destruction. Within the metropolitan capitalist countries at least, their synthesis into alliances of great scope and power of resistance to the "age of reason" was rare—the workers' movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries being the last great instance.