

95c

BUREAUCRACY IN MODERN SOCIETY

PETER M. BLAU

University of Chicago



SS 12

**BUREAUCRACY
IN MODERN SOCIETY**



STUDIES

IN SOCIOLOGY

Bureaucracy in Modern Society

by PETER M. BLAU, *University of Chicago*

With a foreword by

CHARLES H. PAGE, *Princeton University*

Random House

NEW YORK

© COPYRIGHT, 1956, BY RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in New York by Random House, Inc., and in Toronto, Canada, by Random House of Canada, Limited.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER: 56-7690

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

SEVENTH PRINTING, APRIL 1961

FOREWORD

THE MOUNTING interest of social scientists in the study of the structure and dynamics of bureaucracy has several sources. Most apparent is the unprecedented growth in modern society of large-scale formal organizations within which must be developed hierarchical administrative and operating social machinery, if their tasks are to be achieved. The pacesetters, of course, are big business and industry, big government, massive armed forces, and, in recent years, big labor; but bureaucracy's features mark more and more areas of modern life, including, for example, many associations devoted to education, scientific and scholarly pursuits, religion, social welfare, and recreation. These facts of changing social organization are inescapable for social scientist and layman alike.

The moral and political implications of these facts are a second source of interest in bureaucracy. Social scientists, no less than philosophers and artists and many less articulate witnesses—and "victims"—of bureaucracy's multisided thrust, are often deeply concerned with the presumed dangers of standardization and routinization, of impersonality and interchangeability, of bigness itself. These traits of bureaucracy are viewed in many quarters as an imposing threat to freedom, individualism, and spontaneity, cherished values in a liberal society. Such anxieties are not relieved, necessarily, by the recognition of the enormous accomplishments of man's "greatest social invention."

But many social scientists are, or become, social technicians. Managerial preoccupation with the improvement of organizational *efficiency*—whether the goal is the production of automobiles or the training of combat troops

or the provision of social services or the education of young people—encourages the recruitment of personnel equipped with social research skills. And here is a third source of growing interest in bureaucracy. For these recruits are not only social technicians, providing immediately useful information for the managers of men and machines. In many cases, they maintain their scientific role, producing empirical studies, the findings of which, of course, may often serve managerial interests, but may also contribute to accumulative social theory. Thus the Hawthorne Western Electric studies, a landmark investigation of the 1930s, helped to revise the theoretical model of bureaucracy by demonstrating and documenting the role of various social factors in the operations of the plant, including heretofore obscure functions of informal groups and relationships. This study and subsequent reports of the informal and relatively spontaneous features of bureaucracy—in factories, governmental bureaus, military units, and elsewhere—have altered the ever formal model by establishing the positive functional contributions (not merely the dysfunctions) of “bureaucracy’s other face.”

Its informal face was known to Max Weber, although that great theorist’s ideal scheme strongly accents bureaucracy’s formal components. Weber’s theoretical formulations in this subject, supported by the general prestige of his writings among American sociologists in recent years, constitute a further source of widespread interest in bureaucracy.

These several influences are evidenced in a rapidly expanding literature. Recent publications by Reinhard Bendix, Peter Blau, Robert Dubin, Alvin W. Gouldner, S. M. Lipset, Herbert A. Simon, and Philip Selznick (among others) represent efforts to test and refine theoretical propositions on the basis of empirical research. In 1952, R. K. Merton and his colleagues published a source book of

readings,* containing an impressive sample of past and contemporary writings on diverse aspects of bureaucracy. These are sure signs that the serious study of the subject has come of age.

Professor Blau's Short Study is the first systematic sociological textbook on bureaucracy as such. In contrast with some pioneering textual ventures, however, *Bureaucracy in Modern Society* reveals, on the one hand, the author's close familiarity with the numerous and frequently fugitive contributions to the field and, on the other hand, keen insights derived from his own investigations. These qualities help to make this study a text of many merits: theoretical sophistication and conceptual precision; skillful and illuminating utilization of concrete materials—note especially the rewarding exploitation of case studies in the treatment of "Bureaucracy in Process"; clarity of exposition, free of unnecessary jargon and designed to hold the reader to the march of the analysis; economy of presentation, encouraging the student to read more widely in the field, a pursuit now abetted by the availability of an excellent source book.

Bureaucracy in Modern Society possesses a further virtue. For the author brings out sharply positive as well as negative functional interrelations between bureaucracy and democracy, some of which are by no means apparent. To be sure, Professor Blau aligns himself with democratic values. But his study, I believe, is a stimulating and valuable book for bureaucrats themselves, for bureaucracy's severest critics, and for both students and readers in general, more and more of whom today must man bureaucracy's posts.

CHARLES H. PAGE

* *Reader in Bureaucracy*, Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952. Merton's coeditors are Ailsa P. Gray, Barbara Hockey, and Hanan C. Selvin.

CONTENTS

FOREWORD <i>by Charles H. Page</i>	5
I. Why Study Bureaucracy?	13
The Rationalization of Modern Life	14
The Value of Studying Bureaucracy	20
Today	20
In a Democracy	21
For Sociologists	23
II. Theory and Development of Bureaucracy	27
The Concept of Bureaucracy	28
Implications of the Ideal-Type Construct	34
Conditions That Give Rise to Bureaucratization	36
Historical Conditions	36
Structural Conditions	40
III. Bureaucracy in Process	45
Bureaucracy's Other Face	46
In the Navy	46
In a Factory	48
In a Federal Law-Enforcement Agency	50
	9

Organization of Work Groups	53
Bureaucracy's New Face	57
Irrationality of Rationalistic Administration	58
Conditions of Adjustive Development	61
The Task of the Administrator	66
IV. Bureaucratic Authority	69
Strategic Leniency and Authority	70
Power of Sanction	74
Inequality in Hierarchical Organizations	80
V. Bureaucracy and Social Change	85
Who Are the Ritualists?	86
Bureaucracy as Instrument of Innovation	91
Conservative Pressures in Two Social Contexts	96
VI. Bureaucracy and Democracy	
The Accusation of "Red Tape"	102
Contrasting Principles of Internal Control	105
Efficiency versus Dissent	106
A Union with Two Parties	110
A Challenge for Democracy	114
FOOTNOTES	119
SELECTED READINGS	125

**BUREAUCRACY
IN MODERN SOCIETY**

Why Study Bureaucracy?

"THAT STUPID BUREAUCRAT!" Who has not felt this way at one time or another? When we are sent from one official to the next without getting the information we want; when lengthy forms we had to fill out in sextuplicate are returned to us because we forgot to cross a "t" or dot an "i"; when our applications are refused on some technicality—that is when we think of bureaucracy. Colloquially, the term "bureaucracy" has become an epithet which refers to inefficiency and red tape in the government; but this was not its original meaning, and it is not the way the term will be used in this book.

If you alone had the job of collecting the dues in a small fraternity, you could proceed at your own discretion. But if five persons had this job in a large club, they would find it necessary to organize their work lest some members were asked for dues repeatedly and others never. If hun-

dreds of persons have the assignment of collecting taxes from millions of citizens, their work must be very systematically organized; otherwise chaos would reign and the assignment could not be fulfilled. The type of organization designed to accomplish large-scale administrative tasks by systematically coordinating the work of many individuals is called a bureaucracy. This concept, then, applies to organizing principles that are intended to improve administrative efficiency and that generally do so, although bureaucratization occasionally has the opposite effect of producing inefficiency. Since complex administrative problems confront most large organizations, bureaucracy is not confined to the military and civilian branches of the government but is also found in business, unions, churches, universities, and even in baseball.

While the popular notion that bureaucracies are typically inefficient is not valid, this does not mean that the social scientist can simply dismiss it. The prevalence of this false belief in our society is a social fact that should be explained. In this study, after bureaucratic operations have been analyzed and clarified, such an explanation will be suggested in the last chapter. There we shall see that bureaucratization has implications in a democratic society that engender antagonism toward it. Whereas this antagonism usually results from the ruthless efficiency of bureaucracies, and not from their inefficiency, people often feel constrained to give vent to it by accusing bureaucracies of inefficiency, just as you might call a fellow who made you angry "stupid" even though it was not his lack of intelligence that aroused your anger.

The Rationalization of Modern Life

Much of the magic and mystery that used to pervade human life and lend it enchantment has disappeared

from the modern world.* This is largely the price of rationalization. In olden times, nature was full of mysteries, and man's most serious intellectual endeavors were directed toward discovering the ultimate meaning of his existence. Today, nature holds fewer secrets for us. Scientific advances, however, have not only made it possible to explain many natural phenomena but have also channeled human thinking. Modern man is less concerned than, say, medieval man was with ultimate values and symbolic meanings, with those aspects of mental life that are not subject to scientific inquiry, such as religious truth and artistic creation. This is an age of great scientists and engineers, not of great philosophers or prophets.

The secularization of the world that spells its disenchantment is indicated by the large amount of time we spend in making a living and getting ahead, and the little time we spend in contemplation and religious activities. Compare the low prestige of moneylenders and the high prestige of priests in former eras with the very different positions of bankers and preachers today. Preoccupied with perfecting efficient means for achieving objectives, we tend to forget why we want to reach those goals. Since we neglect to clarify the basic values that determine why some objectives are preferable to others, objectives lose their significance, and their pursuit becomes an end in itself. This tendency is portrayed in Budd Shulberg's novel *What Makes Sammy Run?* The answer to the question in the title is that only running makes him run, because he is so busy trying to get ahead that he has no time to find out where he is going. Continuous striving for success is

* The disenchantment of the world is a main theme running through the writings of the German sociologist Max Weber, whose classical analysis of bureaucratic structure will be discussed presently.

not Sammy's means for the attainment of certain ends but the very goal of his life.

These consequences of rationalization have often been deplored, and some observers have even suggested that it is not worth the price.¹ There is no conclusive evidence, however, that alienation from profound values is the inevitable and permanent by-product of rationalization, and not merely an expression of its growing pains. The beneficial results of rationalization—notably the higher standard of living and the greater amount of leisure it makes possible, and the raising of the level of popular education it makes necessary—permit an increasing proportion of the population, not just a privileged elite, to participate actively in the cultural life of the society. This could ultimately lead to a flowering of the arts and other cultural pursuits on a wider scale than that in any earlier period.

Our high standard of living is usually attributed to the spectacular technological developments that have occurred since the Industrial Revolution, but this explanation ignores two related facts. First, the living conditions of most people during the early stages of industrialization, after they had moved from the land into the cities with their sweatshops, were probably much worse than they had been before. Dickens depicts these terrible conditions in certain novels, and Marx describes them in his biting critique of the capitalistic economy.² Second, major improvements in the standard of living did not take place until administrative procedures as well as the material technology had been revolutionized. Modern machines could not be utilized without the complex administrative machinery needed for running factories employing thousands of workers. It was not so much the invention of new machines as the introduction of mass-production methods that enabled Henry Ford to increase wages and yet produce a car so cheaply that it ceased to be a luxury. When