Critical Studies in

Organization & Bureaucracy

Edited by Frank Fischer and Carmen Sirianni

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Preface

Over the past decade, it has become increasingly evident that the study of organizations is confronting a theoretical crisis. For one thing, the sophisticated empirical methodologies of organization theory have failed to explain many of the most important problems in the organizational world. For another, the dominant models of organization have been heavily criticized for their rationalistic, conservative bias. Organization theory, in the view of many, has often unreflectively served to support the bureaucratic status quo, particularly the dominant hierarchial patterns of managerial power.

In the academic world, the signs of this crisis are now widely discussed. The theoretical literature of sociology and political science, as well as the practical journals of business and public administration, is filled with essays on organizational failures. More recently, the popular press has also begun to chronicle the problems of organization and bureaucracy. In the face of growing concern about declining productivity, inferior quality, and conflict-ridden employee relations, the failures of organizational management are now frequently front page news. Even more telling, the topic of management has climbed to the top of the best-seller book list.

In recognition of this organizational malaise, our book is designed to contribute to the search for more adequate organizational approaches. It is founded upon our conviction that good theory must be grounded in practical empirical realities. We have thus shunned the heavy theoretical orientation that characterizes much of the literature in the field and have turned instead to specific organizational issues in empirical settings. In our view, theoretical renewal can be achieved only by developing insights gleaned from the generally neglected facts of organizational life. To facilitate this process, we have presented a series of relevant critical studies that explore these issues. In particular, they focus on the role of power, social control, political economy, women in organizations, alienation and technology, cooperative work arrangements, and organizational democracy. These topics are examined in a broad range of organizational contexts: from the industrial workplace and the corporate boardroom to the Department of Labor and the nuclear power plant, from the university and the social services agency to the post office and the Department

of Defense, from the kibbutz and the consciousness-raising group to quality control circles and worker-owned factories.

The selection of essays for an anthology is always fraught with troublesome choices. In the essays that follow, we have sought to avoid ideological distinctions that separate the range of viewpoints expressed. Instead, our guiding principle has been to select studies that enhance the reader's ability to think critically about the issues and problems confronting organizational participants. To this end, the book begins with a section on classical theory, which presents some of the great debates that continue to inform organizational analysis, and follows in subsequent sections with readable cases of specific organizations (primarily in American society) drawn from a critical perspective.

While we have focused on cases and problems at the expense of theory construction, it is important to stress our debt to the critical tradition in the social sciences. Though no more unified or comprehensive than its mainstream competitors, the critical tradition has existed in the social sciences from the beginning. Over the past decade or two, this tradition has undergone a dramatic renewal in the field of organization theory. Not only has it generally revived interest in the study of organizations in the social sciences, but it has also refocused attention on such problems as organizational power, bureaucratic control, class conflict, alienation, gender, and political economy. We have borrowed heavily from this emerging perspective, presenting a selection of some of its recent contributions.

We have tried throughout to keep a wide range of students in mind. As a result, the book can be used by students of organization and bureaucracy in sociology and political science, as well as those in administratively oriented professional programs that require study of organizational behavior. As either primary text or supplemental reading, it speaks to the issues raised in professionally oriented public administration programs, labor and management studies, and human and social services.

Finally, editing a book of this kind necessarily involves assistance and advice from many friends and colleagues. While it is impossible to mention all who have been involved, we would like to single out a number of people for special thanks. Two in particular were most important: Jane Barrett and Andrea Walsh both steadily supplied editorial insight, as well as constant encouragement and support. To them, we wish to acknowledge our deeply felt personal gratitude.

Also, we want to thank Jennifer French, Lew Friedland, Alan Mandell, Paula Rayman, Wolf Heydebrand, Nancy DiTomaso, John Forester, Joel Rogers, Michael Smith, and Gordon Adams. Each offered useful comments at various stages along the way.

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Thanksgiving Day 1983

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Organization Theory and Bureaucracy: A Critical Introduction

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The concept of bureaucratic organization, which condenses a development of almost two centuries of social and political analysis, was a focus of interest for many of the classical theorists, including Max Weber, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Gaetano Mosca, and Robert Michels. By the mid-twentieth century, it had become one of the most important concepts of modern social and political life. In the 1930s, writers began to speak of the "managerial revolution" and the coming "bureaucratization of the world." Today, terms such as the "bureaucratic phenomenon" or "organizational America" are commonplace in social science literature.[1]

Organizational America is something of a paradox. On the one hand, the efficiencies of large-scale organizations have made possible the unprecedented material growth of the twentieth century; on the other hand, the scope of their power and influence has come to threaten our basic social and political values, particularly individual freedom. While George Orwell's classic on "big brother" appears premature in 1984, no one can deny the disturbing growth of centralized bureaucratic control that pervades more and more areas of modern life. In the face of giant corporations and big government, with access to technological surveillance and centralized data banks, Bertram Gross has characterized these modern trends as "friendly fascism."[2] At times, the term has a ring of credence.

For modern capitalist systems the problem poses itself as a unique ideological embarrassment. As the progeny of Adam Smith's eighteenth-century philosophy of the free market, as well as the nineteenth-century belief in "rugged individualism," the rise of large-scale bureaucratic capitalism is a perverse anomaly. "Organization man" has replaced the free-market entrepreneur, but we are still guided by various conceptions of market capitalism. Even though most people have come to accept large-scale organization as a "necessary evil," they accept it only because

of the material abundance with which it is associated. More difficult to justify or rationalize are the interrelated social and political realities of this phenomenon. The internal work environments of these bureaucracies produce dull and alienating social relations; centralized government and the corporate system pose political dangers for our traditional concepts of democracy. In the face of these fundamental tensions, theorists such as Juergen Habermas have spoken of a potential "crisis of legitimacy."[3]

Socialist systems have fared no better. Large-scale organization and its techniques of planning have permitted socialist regimes to rapidly industrialize underdeveloped regions of the world, often bringing impressive material achievements. However, much that passes as modern socialism has, at the same time, produced an authoritarian form of bureaucratic collectivism generally unknown to liberal capitalist systems. Given the fact that liberation from the capitalist state has long been the rallying call of socialism, this harsh reality is a fundamental embarrassment. For one thing, there is no shortage of literature on the tyrannies of social and political life under a bureaucratic police state and its "new class."[4] For another, the economic irrationalities of centralized directive planning have become increasingly clear not only to democratic and socialist oppositions, but also to many within the economic, administrative, and political apparatuses as well.[5]

In view of the dimensions of the problem, it is surprising to see how little agreement exists about the conceptual foundations of organization theory. For example, one writer has found more than ten different competing definitional criteria for the term bureaucracy.[6] Given the level of conceptual confusion, another has gone so far as to suggest that the term be banished from social science literature.[7] In view of the omnipresence of the bureaucratic revolution in twentieth century life, this is indeed an intellectually troublesome state of affairs. One might say that the conventional literature of organization theory is characterized by something of a paradox: As the importance of bureaucratic organization has grown in modern society, our ability to conceptualize and explain this phenomenon has continued to decline.

Recognition of the problem has begun to grow over the past ten or fifteen years. Many scholars in the field have begun to express an uneasiness about the theoretical and epistemological status of organizational analysis. Ironically, as the methodologies of organizational analysis have become more sophisticated, they have been less successful in solving the practical problems confronting organizational participants.

Perrow, for example, argues that over the past seventy years it is fair to say that our theories have been explaining realities that don't exist.[8] In his view, the sophisticated empirical methodologies of organizational sociology explain only a small percentage of the variance found in the organiza-

tional world. Similarly, in political science it is common to speak of an "intellectual crisis" in the theory of public administration.[9] More recently, this concern has spread beyond sociologists and political scientists to include administrative theorists. For instance, pointing to a "crisis in organizational science," Susman and Evered capture the dilemma in these words:

> Many of the findings in our scholarly management journals are only remotely related to the real world of practicing managers and to the actual issues with which members of organizations are concerned, especially when the research has been carried out by the most rigorous methods of the prevailing conception of science.[10]

While no adequate theory has yet to emerge to explain the failures of organization theory, a new breed of theorists has begun to revitalize the conceptual machinery of the field. Engaged in what can broadly be construed as the search for a "critical" perspective, the competing concepts and methodologies of these writers often differ as much as they converge. In general, however, they tend to merge around two major themes. All share a common disdain for the traditionally dominant organizational paradigm stressing "rational efficiency" and its variants. All urge that primary emphasis be placed on the problems of power, politics, and control.

It is difficult to list all of the criticisms that have been leveled at the rational paradigm. Aiken and Zey-Ferrell, for example, have enumerated as many as twelve different dimensions that have come under attack, while others such as Goldman have organized the criticisms around a few central themes.[11] Common to all of the approaches is a concern over the conservative/elitist bias of organizational theory, a general absence of social class analysis, a failure to connect the organization to the political economy of the larger social and historical context, a general neglect of political and bureaucratic power, and the ideological uses of scientific organizational analysis.

The rational paradigm of organization theory in its classic form views the organization as an instrument of efficiency. An organization is viewed as a rationally designed means for the explicit realization of given goals. As a central theoretical concept, bureaucratic structure is understood to be a means for improving efficiency. Alvin Gouldner, in one of the seminal critiques of the rational model, put the issue this way:

> The rational model assumes that decisions are made on the basis of a rational survey of the situation, utilizing certified knowledge with a deliberate orientation to an expressly codified legal apparatus. The focus is, therefore, on the legally prescribed structure—i.e., the formally "blueprinted" patterns—since these are more largely subject to deliberate inspection and rational manipulation.[12]

Traditionally, this rational model has been characterized as a "mechanistic" perspective. As Gouldner further explains, "it views the organization as a structure of manipulable parts, each of which is separately modifiable with a view to enhancing the efficiency as a whole." Thus, modifications of the organization can be introduced through rational planning based on scientific managerial analysis. Applying the "natural laws" of organizational science, the proper scientific design of elite administrative planners will produce a cooperative harmony of organizational interests.

The origins of the rational model are not difficult to locate. In this country, the pioneering research that initiated the discipline was closely intertwined with the rise of corporate capitalism and its bureaucratic mode of organization. Men such as Frederick W. Taylor, Elton Mayo, and Chester Barnard were all dedicated students of business efficiency with close ties to the industrial community.

Taylor's work on "scientific management" is often posited as the formal beginning of the rational model.[13] Generally identified with "time and motion" studies and the "organization chart," Taylor's efforts were aimed to achieve greater efficiency through physical analysis of work in production-oriented organizations. For Taylor, the key to greater efficiency is to be found in the division of labor and the formal rules or principles that govern it. The task of scientific management is to uncover the single most efficient method of organizing and, through a proper division of labor, bring the employees in line with it. Emphasizing a clear-cut division of labor, scientific management has stressed the study of functional specialization, unity of command, centralized decision making, top-down authority, and a narrow span of control.

In addition to Taylor, the study of the formal (rational) aspects of organization has also been greatly influenced by the theory of bureaucracy put forward by the German sociologist Max Weber.[14] Generally considered to be the father of modern organizational sociology, Weber was not concerned with a theory of organizational management per se, though his emphasis clearly resembles the tenets of scientific management. In this respect, seven basic similarities are apparent between Weber's theory of bureaucracy and Taylor's concepts of hierarchy and specialization. For Weber, bureaucratic organization is defined by (1) a division of labor with clearly defined authority relationships and responsibilities, (2) offices organized into a hierarchy or chain of command, (3) managerial offices selected from technical qualifications determined by education and examination, (4) rules and regulations governing the conduct of work, (5) impersonality between management and employees, (6) career-oriented officials receiving fixed salaries, and (7) in the case of government administrators, administrative appointments rather than the election of department heads.

This convergence of the hierarchical models of bureaucratic administration of Taylor and Weber and the work that has evolved in this tradition has often been referred to as the "machine model" of organization. Its fundamental assumptions have been succinctly captured in these words:

> The individual had to adjust to the organization; the design of the physical structure—the anatomy of the organization—came first and, indeed, was the principal consideration. This was the "organization" and efficiency depended upon the proper initial arrangements and later readjustments of the "parts," that is, the organizational subdivisions.[15]

While Weber, unlike Taylor, was a scholar rather than a consultant to industry, his theory also has had a major influence on the search for a rational basis for large-scale organization. Where Taylor focused on the physical dimensions of production, Weber emphasized the problem of authority. For Weber, authority is the cornerstone of any organization. It directs the organization toward its goal: It imposes order on chaos.

Of primary concern to Weber was the replacement of dominant "old-world" forms of organizational authority based on tradition and charismatic leadership with a "rational-legal" type of authority, which would facilitate the emergence of modern capitalism in Germany.[16] Authority founded upon tradition was inefficient for free-market competition because leadership was based on continuity rather than competence; charismatic leadership was inefficient because of its reliance on emotion and mystique instead of fixed rules and routines. In contrast, the "legal-rational" type of authority is linked to clearly defined, procedurally-determined rules and regulations; they are designed to coordinate the relationships among the various administrative units and to direct them collectively toward the efficient accomplishment of organizational goals. Obedience and compliance of subordinates is connected to legal-like rules rather than particular persons. Subordinates obey commands from their superiors, but superiors also comply with regulations. Authority, thus, is anchored to the rules governing the rational pursuit of goals. And this, it is important to recognize, links with scientific management, where the task is to uncover the rules governing the rational pursuit of goals.

For Weber, the bureaucracy fitting the rational-legal model represented the purest form of administration. This ideal model succeeded in becoming a basic analytical or conceptual foundation of modern organization theory. As one writer put it, "combination or alloys would appear in practice but Weber wanted to characterize an ideal type for the purposes of theoretical analysis."[17]

Mainstream writers have found many flaws with the rationalistic model and, over the past few decades, have spawned numerous schools as a response to its failures. The first and most famous of these efforts was

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