



Post-bureaucracy and Weber's "modern" bureaucrat

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a re-examination of the Weberian corpus.

Design/methodology/approach – Discusses the Weberian corpus and the discrepancies and lacunae in Weber's accounts. Outlines "Weberian" bureaucracy in the post-bureaucracy literature, the use and utility of ideal types and the problems of ideal typifications.

Findings – The so-called "Weberian ideal type" which is the standard reference point in bureaucracy versus post-bureaucracy discussion is only ambiguously related to what Weber himself wrote. Usually "Weberian" bureaucracy is equated with rule-governed hierarchy. This is a gross over-simplification of Weber's thought, but his "ideal type" demands radical re-tooling in order to be usable. The components he itemized and the importance he attached to them are inconsistent, they are abstracted from exemplars which Weber privileged without explanation, and he gave no unambiguous criteria for deciding which components this ideal type should include or exclude. Moreover, he equated bureaucratic organization with modernity, when on his own account there were fully bureaucratic organizations centuries before "modernity". His ideal type thus cannot yield a clear distinction between bureaucratic and "post"-bureaucratic organizations, unless "bureaucracy" is flattened into "hierarchy", and "post"-bureaucratic into "non-hierarchical". But hierarchy cannot be eliminated from complex organizations, and bureaucracy can be re-theorized to include any non-contradictory attributes. Therefore, there can be adaptations of bureaucracy, but *ex hypothesi* there cannot be a "post-bureaucratic era".

Originality/value – The paper shows that Weber's ideal type can be re-theorized to include any "non-contradictory attributes".

Keywords Bureaucracy, Sociology, History, Political philosophy

Paper type Research paper

"Post-bureaucracy" is a concept used principally for two purposes. The first is to designate what commentators, "critical" as well as "orthodox", agree are distinctive recent forms of organisation and management that indiscriminating ideas of "bureaucracy" cannot readily accommodate. The watch-words for these innovations are "project", "mission", "team", "virtuality", "network", "alliances", "information", "knowledge" "horizontal", "flexibility", "adaptability", "empowerment", "enterprise" etc. What is in dispute is not the existence of these "post-bureaucratic" forms of organisation and management, but how exactly they differ from bureaucratic forms, to what extent they are replacing them, and how they are to be characterized and judged (Alvesson and Thompson, 2005). The second purpose served by the employment of "post-bureaucracy" is to identify what some commentators consider to be fundamental changes not merely in organisation and management, but in the times we live in, perhaps the end of an era.

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The two employments of “post-bureaucracy” are not necessarily connected. Claims of the latter sort are more sensational, and are attractive in the study of organisation and management which relishes sweeping diagnoses of our world. Like the entire genre of “post-” or “late” concepts (post-modernism, post-Fordism, late-capitalism, late-modernity, post-colonial, post-industrial, post-feminist and all the rest), “post-bureaucracy” relies on the kind of periodisation that is highly usable from that point of view. The more aggressive formulations of the “end of bureaucracy” story, the favourite targets of more circumspect or sceptical commentators, invariably include Osborne and Gaebler (1993), a very readable polemic with an array of illustrations that should give pause to any enthusiast for bureaucracy, but scarcely an academic text; Heckscher (1994), an academic and careful theoretization of the post-bureaucratic ideal type; as well as Heydebrand, or Hydebrandt (1989), an earlier work by Clegg (1990), Barzelay (1992), Osborne and Plastrik (1998), management gurus like Peters (1992) and Handy (1996), and more recently and also much cited, Child and McGrath (2001). (A full array of citations is to be found in McSweeney in this issue.) Unguarded assertions about post-bureaucracy are, however, not the exclusive preserve of “orthodox” management theorists. Willmott’s (1993) polemic about the “totalitarianism” supposedly implicit in post-bureaucracy, and the interpretation of post-bureaucratic forms as “soft despotism” (Rose, 1999), are cases in point. But it is by now almost the conventional view that there is no simple, unilinear story to be told about bureaucracy being superseded by post-bureaucracy. The concept of “hybridity” is one attractive way of acknowledging that things are not quite what they were in western organisation and management (Clegg and Courpasson, 2004). But what sort of story should replace “post-bureaucratic” hyperbole? No attempt to provide such a story is made here. What follows is some reflections prompted by the endemic habit of definition and re-definition which is such a conspicuous feature of post-bureaucracy/bureaucracy discussions.

Any idea of post-bureaucracy self-evidently presupposes bureaucracy, and perhaps also “non-bureaucracy” and “pre-bureaucracy”. By common consent, the *fons et origo* and the point of reference here is Max Weber, although his account of bureaucracy is perhaps more often invoked than studied. Revisiting the Weberian corpus shows that any attempt to identify some new or “post” form of organisation with his thought as the point of reference is bound to be as inconclusive as denials that anything has “really” changed.

Weber’s accounts

The Weberian corpus contains two general treatments of bureaucracy. Both are in the posthumous and incomplete *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Economy and Society, henceforth *WG*) published in 1922. The short version (*WG*, Pt I, Ch. 3, ss. 3-5), a kind of prescriptive glossary but with some substantive discussion, was a revised manuscript of c. 1918, locating bureaucracy in the context of “rational” or “legal” *Herrschaft*, that is, rule or government[1]. A much fuller, but unrevised and unfinished earlier discussion without any context (*WG*, Pt III, Ch. 6) was written according to his editors between 1910 and 1914. (For datings see Mommsen, 1974, p. 16, fn. 22, and Keith Tribe’s introduction to Hennis, 1988, pp. 12-13.) Among other things, it seeks to distinguish between “modern” bureaucracy and earlier types of administration (which Weber also frequently called “bureaucracies”), and also discusses the preconditions,

features, and some of the broader consequences of bureaucracy – the phenomenon, not the ideal type. Weber also addressed aspects of the topic in *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland* (Parliament and Government in the new order in Germany) of 1918, *Politik als Beruf* (*The Profession and Vocation of Politics*) from 1918 to 1919, and in passing elsewhere (Sica, 2000, pp. 52-6). These writings are less convoluted and more polemical than *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, but the same material and even the same expressions often reappear.

All these accounts read bureaucracy as having the following attributes, listed here in no order of significance, and with no suggestion of connectedness:

- “All rule (*Herrschaft*) over a multiplicity of people normally (but not absolutely always) requires a staff of administrators”, reliably executing the general ordinances and specific commands of the *Herrschaft* (*WG*, p. 123) or leader, director (*Leiter*, p. 26). Bureaucracy is the modern manner of securing their orderly, routine, day-to-day execution (p. 650).
- It is characterised by strict hierarchy: delimited “jurisdictions” (*Kompetenzen*) and resources are assigned from the top to officials and offices. Hierarchy in this sense is constitutive of modern bureaucracy (*WG*, pp. 125, 650, 655-6). It involves a highly-articulated division of labour, and strict and uniform discipline and control over the personnel.
- This hierarchy is “monocratic” (pp. 128, 650); i.e. its apex is one person, not a college.
- Both the organisation and the conduct of business of bureaucracies are *straff* (a favourite term, e.g. pp. 128-9, 642, 656-7, 659-61), that is: taut, tight, ram-rod straight (like the bearing of soldiers on parade).
- Officials are grouped into *Behörden*, that is, bureaux, departments, agencies, sections, or ministries (pp. 125, 650).
- Bureaucracy means subjection to impersonal rules (pp. 126, 651, 662), requiring officials to treat their “subjects” impersonally, *sine ira et studio* (one of Weber’s absolutely favourite expressions), and without respect to persons or status (pp. 129, 662). This is contrasted with the “material” justice, sometimes “Khadi-justice”, practiced by earlier and other administrations (*WG*, pp. 157, 468, 486, 663), and still expected by democrats. These rules also govern recruitment and advancement (and demotion or dismissal, rarely mentioned, e.g. p. 127), in accordance with impersonal criteria.
- Professional qualifications and knowledge (*Fachwissen*) are of the essence of bureaucracy. Officials owe their positions, at least in the “most rational case”, to examinations and diplomas certifying their professional qualification (*WG*, pp. 126-7, 129, 676), which are constantly increasing in importance in all bureaucracies. Equally, status and authority depend upon the official’s professional expertise. Elsewhere, however, he asserted that Britain (England), France and America had either wholly or in large measure done without formal examinations, except for admission to the civil service (*WG*, p. 675).
- Officials are selected (*Ernennung*, “nomination”) by their superiors, not elected (pp. 127, 653).

- Promotion is by “next in line” (*aufrücken*) and not merit, and salaries relate to status, not to performance, at least if bureaucrats have their way (pp. 127, 654-5, 676). Bureaucratic jobs are for life, and carry a right to a pension and some security against arbitrary dismissal (pp. 127, 654, 676).
- The keeping of records (*Akten*, files) is decisive (pp. 126, 651); for Weber this was not, however, emblematic of blind addiction of routine, the colloquial connotation of “bureaucracy” (or “red tape”), but as critical to the “rationality” and “efficiency” of bureaucracy as an instrument of power (*Machtmittel*) for rulers and employers (p. 677).
- The remuneration of officials is fixed, and is “normally” in the form of salaries, which for some reason were described as not an essential part of the concept of bureaucracy (*begriffswesentlich*, p. 127). Officials have no independent status or income, and office does not become property; Weber relished the analogy between officials being progressively separated from ownership of the “means of administration” (*Verwaltungsmittel*), and workers – in Marxian fashion – being separated from the means of production (pp. 127, 665).
- Great importance attaches to official secrets and secretiveness (pp. 129, 671-3; Weber, 1920, p. 187): “bureaucracy hides what it knows and does from criticism” (*WG*, p. 671). This point is hardly ever referred to in the secondary literature.
- Bureaucratic administration is increasingly characteristic of private, commercial, industrial, charitable, ecclesiastical, military and any other large organisations, political parties, trade unions, etc. (*WG*, pp. 127, 654-5, 665-6; Weber, 1920, p. 140). Only the capitalist entrepreneur is superior to state bureaucrats in terms of professional and factual knowledge (*WG*, p. 129).

Discrepancies and lacunae in Weber’s accounts

The most obvious conclusion from all this is that, as it stands, Weber’s account of bureaucracy is unusable as a reference point for identifying post-bureaucracy. This is not because Weber’s concern is for the most part with governmental bureaucracies, or organisations whose close involvement with the state encouraged them to parallel its structure, such as political parties, large industries, enterprises, banks and universities, and not with organisation in general. Public sector organisations are among the chief concerns and illustrations of “post-bureaucracy”. A more fundamental difficulty is the absence in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* of connective tissue linking together the various “components” of bureaucracy, and the lack of prioritisation among them, despite the proliferation of headings, numbered paragraphs, sub-paragraphs and *Sperrschrift* (equivalent to italics). An informal summary in “Parliament and Government in Germany” in 1918 is equally unmethodical:

[T]he . . . unequivocal criterion for the modernisation of the state [since the Middle Ages] has been progress towards a bureaucratic officialdom (*bürokratisches Beamtentum*) based on appointment (*Anstellung*; i.e. not birth), salary, pension, promotion [?], professional training, firmly established areas of responsibility, procedures reliant on keeping files (*Aktenmässigkeit*), hierarchical structures of superiority and subordination (Weber, 1994, pp. 145-6, slightly modified; German version p. 140).

There are substantial discrepancies and variations between the different accounts, even regarding what is “essential”, or definitive of the ideal typical bureaucracy. The later

account (WG, pp. 126-7), for example, emphasised that civil servants (*Beamten*) are personally free, and contractually engaged, with a right to terminate the contract by resignation. Indeed Weber there described the contractual character of bureaucratic employment as being of the essence (*wesentlich*) of modern bureaucracy. In the earlier account, its contractual character was almost denied: "it is not a mere exchange of performances for money, like the free contract of labour" (pp. 651-2). Instead, the job of civil servant is there described as a *Beruf* (a "vocation and profession"; see Speirs's comments on *Beruf* in Weber, 1994, p. 372) and a matter of duty (*Pflichtcharakter*), a duty of loyalty to the office (*Amtstreuepflicht*, p. 652); there is a sense of the honour due to one's stand, i.e. social standing (*Standesehrgefühl*, p. 657), so that the *Beamter* is prepared to subordinate himself unconditionally (literally: devoid of any will, *willensloseste*) to his superior (p. 657). However, Weber's account is often simply in terms of personal and group self-interest: bureaucracy is a "machinery that runs on ceaselessly" (p. 669), and continues to function impeccably even with changes of leader or regime; its members are "chained", or "welded to it" (the mixed metaphors are Weber's) by both self-interest and habit. The later account only mentioned *Pflicht* (duty) in passing (p. 129). The few opaque lines here devoted to the *Formalismus* and the "material-utilitarian" ethic of bureaucrats (WG, p. 130) have no parallel in the earlier one.

Again, in his earlier account but not the later one Weber saw discipline – for him an indispensable characteristic of bureaucracy and a simple implicate of hierarchy – as arising from military discipline, "the womb of discipline in general" for bureaucracy (itself "the most rational child of discipline", WG, p. 642) as for all large organisations (*Grossbetriebe*). The latter are, however, also "great educators in discipline" (WG, p. 647). Why he recognised no religious provenance or aura for the duty, honour and discipline of the bureaucrat (unlike the capitalist) is unclear (though see the allusion to *exercitia spiritualia* in WG, p. 643). I comment on this later.

Weber was also indecisive on the connection between bureaucracy and modern means of communication, describing them as essential (*wesentlich*) (WG, p. 129), but in the earlier version merely as pacemakers (*Schrittmacher*, p. 660). He treated the telephone, telegraph, postal services and railways (no mention of motor vehicles, or even of typewriters or carbon paper) merely as crucial aids to efficiency, whereas there were capitalist private enterprises, such as Sears Roebuck operating with enormous success from the 1880s, which were inconceivable without modern means of communication; the same could be said of every "modern" social service bureaucracy and the military.

All Weber's accounts hinge on the technical, professional knowledge of the bureaucrat (*Fachwissen*). He proved prophetic about the growing significance of professional (paper, academic) qualifications in all organisations. However, he was not unambiguous about what exactly that bureaucratic "knowledge" was. He acknowledged the importance of practical experience (WG, p. 129: "Fachwissen und Tatsachenkenntnis"; p. 674). But the earlier piece stressed tertiary level educational qualifications (WG, p. 676), principally in law and "administrative science", or *Kontorwissenschaft* in commercial enterprises (p. 651). According to Weber, "education-certificates" are valued as much for the bureaucrat's social standing as for any professional utility; indeed he saw them as evidence of bureaucracy becoming an "estate" (p. 676), and of "plutocratisation" (p. 129), in view of the wealth needed to acquire them (p. 676). Social status, security of tenure, a pension and, under pressure

from the bureaucracy, orderly disciplinary proceedings (p. 676) compensate for the generally lower level of salaries compared to private employment (p. 654), a point not made in the later discussion.

Even Weber's choice of term to designate his subject matter was peculiar. "Bureaucracy" was an ironic analogy to "aristocracy" or "democracy": "rule by bureaux"; the job of bureaux, after all, is not to rule but to administer, that is, to serve. It became common parlance from the early nineteenth century onwards (Krygier, 1979), and has always retained its pejorative connotation in all European languages. But then, pace du Gay (2000), although Weber was certainly not writing an indictment of bureaucracy, neither was his portrait a legitimation, or even particularly sympathetic. It was only in 1918-1919, when confronted with the Munich *Räterepublik* and the absurdities of Marxist and Socialist claims about the dispensability of bureaucracy that the worth and the "ethical" aspects of the civil servant's "calling" came into focus for Weber. He now contrasted it with that of the vocational politician on the one side, and the street politics of "sterile excitement" (*Aufgeregtsein*, roughly equivalent to our "being hyper") and "personality" of students, revolutionaries and other "parasites" (*Schmarotzer*, Weber, 1920, p. 345) on the other. Even so, a page in *"Politik als Beruf"* (Weber, 1994, pp. 330-1) on the *ethos* of bureaucracy, the ideal of public service or stern devotion to impersonal dutifulness is all there is in the entire Weberian corpus that is not purely *en passant*. Until then, he had been as much or more interested in the way bureaucrats advanced their own material interests, especially in power (*Machtinteresse*), in their "sure instincts about the conditions for maintaining [their] power", at the expense of other parts of the body politic, and in the bureaucracy's power and indispensability even *vis-à-vis* its supposed "masters" (e.g. *WG*, pp. 129, 664, 671-3). The other polemical target of the earlier discussion was the naiveties and unwillingness to embrace formal principles of justice of various unspecified "democrats" (especially *WG*, pp. 662-5).

"Weberian" bureaucracy in the post-bureaucracy literature

In sum, Weber's discussions of bureaucracy have a variable content, and some fixed points. The so-called "Weberian" ideal type in the bureaucracy and post-bureaucracy literature is a construct of later writers, involving drastic pruning and grafting. It ignores even what Weber explicitly designated as decisive, if for example, it appears to be peculiar to governmental bureaucracies, or to Prussia (Hales, 2002, p. 52). So Heckscher's summary is:

... the major concepts [defining bureaucracy] articulated by Weber are the same ones still used by most managers in their conscious planning: rationality, accountability, and hierarchy;

... for Weber, perhaps the central concept was the differentiation of person from office ... the key to bureaucracy is the rational definition of offices (Heckscher, 1994, p. 19; see also the useful schematic outline in Hodgson, 2004, p. 84).

The differentiation of person from office is, ironically, also the feature of Weberian bureaucracy singled out by "anti-post-bureaucracy" theorists such as du Gay and Kallinikos. Walton (2005, p. 572), surveying the literature on organisation and management, sees the "widely studied" variables of differentiation, standardisation, decentralisation and formalisation as the "primary characteristics in Weber's model of bureaucratic control". More informal invocations of Weber's authority are even more

ready to add and subtract items as convenient, sometimes with explicit acknowledgment (Hales, 2002, pp. 52-4) and sometimes not. Thus Ritzer (1996, pp. 17-121) imputes to Weberian bureaucracy the "four components of formal rationality: efficiency, predictability, quantification and control through the substitution of non-human for human technology" (p. 20). The last two components are not Weber; efficiency is not a component of rationality; and the Nazi corpse-factories Ritzer cites, as well as the Communist ones he ignores, are not remotely "realisations" (Ritzer, p. 21) of Weber's worst fears about bureaucracy, or his "iron cage of rationality" (du Gay, 2000, p. 49).

Selective reception and appropriation aside, the "basic principles of bureaucracy" imputed to Weber (e.g. Maravelias, p. 551) are in effect simply the components of any hierarchical arrangement, with the addition of Weber's insistence that in "modern" bureaucracy the whole is governed by abstract rules, in other words the rule of law. All this together is "the central feature of bureaucracy" for Alvesson and Thompson's (2005, p. 491) valuable survey. Fayol (1999) offered a much more methodical interpretation of administration as hierarchy, and also dealt with organisations in general, but his work has not been imbued with the authority later attributed to Weber.

The use and utility of ideal types

In discussing bureaucracy, Weber was in part developing an ideal type, although he also engaged in sociological interpretation of, and political commentary on, actual bureaucracies. The subject of ideal types warrants discussion at book-length, but some comments are nonetheless necessary here. Weber made clear what he did not mean by an ideal type. It is a construct, a composition, an abstraction, and not a "mirroring" or "representation" that captures the essence or totality of some reality (Weber, 1951, e.g. pp. 190, 193). For Weber that is impossible, and typifies Marxist and positivist reification. For him the only irreducible reality is the infinite, meaningless multiplicity of facts. It is only an interpreting intelligence that abstracts from that multiplicity features which it, and not reality itself, designates as essential, defining, *wesentlich*, from some point of view (Weber, 1951, esp. pp. 190-205). Nor is an ideal type a résumé of the features common to all bureaucracies: this would presuppose the possibility of unproblematic identification of bureaucracies in the world, in which case ideal typification would be unnecessary. Nor (obviously) is a Weberian ideal type a dictionary definition, or mere stipulation. But he produced only sketchy and allusive explanations as to how the method and logic of ideal typification might actually work. He described them as a kind of "utopia" (*Wissenschaftslehre*, p. 190), which is unhelpful given the absence of agreement about the nature and value (if any) of utopias (Lasky, 1976; Logan, 1983). More significantly, ideal types are "one-sided accentuations" of certain features of reality (*Wissenschaftslehre*, p. 191), and Weber gave heuristic utility and absence of internal self-contradiction as the criteria for judging them (e.g. p. 190). However, any conception of anything can be rendered free of contradictions by simply removing them. The decisive criterion is, therefore, the "heuristic utility" of Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy.

Problems of ideal typifications

Two decisive features detract from the heuristic utility of Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy: the first is essentially methodological and pertains to the logic of its

construction; the second is substantive, relating to the periodisation inherent in it. The latter will be treated below.

Methodology

The Weberian corpus does not yield any criteria for deciding which features an ideal type of bureaucracy should properly include or exclude. Nor does it provide any justification for his singling out some features as essential, or in the nature of bureaucracy, and others not. His work does nothing to explain, either, how ideal types are abstracted. Given his epistemological position (which again cannot be discussed here, but see Turner and Factor (1994) and Eliaeson (2002)), Weber could not, and did not, claim to be eliciting an ideal type from an examination of "the facts" of bureaucracy. But he presents the ideal type of bureaucracy as if it results from a historically rigorous distinction between genus and species. So bureaucracy is the species, more precisely the distinctively "modern" species, of the genus administration. But Weber's examinations of historical administrative forms already presuppose an identification of "administration", and therefore, *Herrschaft*. In other words, they already presuppose some more or less elaborated theory, which specific examples of administrations could only refine but not generate. That theory, as Hennis (1988) has rightly concluded, is in fact a political theory (in my view a theory of institutional architecture, of the same genre as Machiavelli's, Harrington's and Montesquieu's theories of republics and monarchies, or Tocqueville's democracy). But Weber himself did not articulate it, or regard articulating it in this connection as essential. Nevertheless an ideal type is not a check-list, but a theory.

Abstracting from what? Weber's choice of paradigm instances of bureaucracy. An ideal type of bureaucracy, then, is an "abstraction", and in effect a theory. But it cannot be abstracted from nothing in particular, and it must be a theory of something. "One-sided accentuation" of features actually present in reality, again, demands a reality whose features are to be accentuated. Weber's paradigm or model instance of a bureaucratic reality was transparently post-Bismarckian Germany, albeit with earlier Prussian allusions. It is not modelled on, say, the British civil service after the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms, or the overblown bureaucracies which developed in nineteenth century France (Krygier, 1979). Weber's claim (e.g. *WG*, p. 128) that "monocratic" rule reliant on documentation (*aktenmässig*) is superseding rule by "colleges" elevates a distinctively Prussian administrative reform into a feature of the ideal type: the civil service co-ordination of British ministries, for example, was and remains "collegial". Equally Prussian was his emphasis on the significance of professional qualifications in bureaucracies. He meant formal academic qualifications in law, the *Juristenmonopol*, but also in various disciplines unheard of in Britain, France and America and (for all I know), the Latin countries. *Verwaltungswissenschaft*, designating what had been taught in German universities since the eighteenth century as *Kameralistik*, had absolutely no British equivalent. University politics courses devised in Britain for imperial administrators in the later nineteenth century (Collini *et al.*, 1983, Chapter 11) were resolutely humanistic and philosophical in orientation. Weber also spoke persistently, and puzzlingly, of the "pure", "purest", or even "most rational" (*WG*, pp. 126-7) instances of bureaucracy, and its "most developed" or "modern" form; he described it as "a late product of development" (*WG*, p. 677). But why should Prussia exemplify all this, rather than, say, Britain or France, or for that

matter Russia? Weber's choice of exemplars of bureaucracy necessarily restricted what his ideal type could include and exclude: what one can find depends on where one looks.

Most students of organisation are familiar with the notion that there are more varieties of hierarchy and variations within hierarchy than Weber allowed. He, for example, said nothing about the "shape" of the bureaucratic pyramid (apart from at the "monocratic" apex). It could have many "layers" or few, and all manner of relationships are possible between and within its layers. Equally, the co-ordination of different offices into a single department, or of different departments and organs into a single state apparatus need not be "monocratic". Again, there are many attributes of bureaucracy that do not feature in Weber's ideal type. He did not, for example, consider the extant legitimations of bureaucracies, which in Germany were no doubt ultimately built on the rock of Hegel's description of bureaucracy as the "universal class". Committed as he was to an interpretative understanding of human conduct, it is strange that Weber saw no significance in how bureaucracies presented themselves to the world, and indeed to themselves: for example, letterheads, emblems, seals, bureaucratic architecture, or – since he claimed that bureaucracy pervaded all "modern" organisation – the architecture and art of commerce. He took no notice even of bureaucratic nomenclatures and modes of address: consider for instance the pregnant title secretaries (whence *Geheimrat*, "Permanent Secretary", Secretariat, etc.), etymologically someone entrusted with, or capable of keeping, a secret. But symbolism of any kind was not Weber's strongest point in any case. Do symbolism and legitimation, then, not belong in an ideal type of bureaucracy. If not, why not? Lacunae like these might have become apparent with a different choice of paradigmatic examples against which to measure his ideal type. An ideal type cannot of course be refuted by "the facts", since it is not a mirror or representation of some phenomenon. But its heuristic utility, sensitizing us to what requires investigation, might have been, or may be, improved by such amplification.

Weber's periodizations

For Weber and those who cite him as their authority, hierarchy is the *sine qua non* of bureaucracy. Conversely, the apparent absence or attenuation of hierarchical features in some kinds of organisation is the principal reason for postulating post-bureaucracy. Now, the theological and ecclesiastical derivation of "hierarchy" is written on its face: literally, a government of priests (*hieros* and *arkhê*). Nonetheless, Weber almost completely neglected ecclesiastical orders as a paradigm example or comparator for any conception of bureaucracy. A possible explanation, at any rate coherent with Weber's philosophy of history, is that he was equating bureaucracy *stricto sensu* with modernity, and the church (here meaning the catholic church) was not for him an illustration of modernity. Bureaucracy, however, is for Weber the modern species of administration and it, together with modern *Herrschaft* and even modern industry, compose the *personae* in Weber's majestic drama of modernity, with rationality, rationalisation or rationalism (used interchangeably) as its defining theme.

Rationality or rationalisation for Weber means principally the calculative adaptation of means to independently formulated ends. His famous ideal typical trinity of types of *Herrschaft* relies on an infelicitous distinction between "legal-rational" and "traditional" authority, where tradition unsuitedly means custom blindly followed. His main claim for

bureaucracy is precisely its “rationality”, as opposed to “earlier” forms of administration, which relied to a greater or lesser extent on customary practice and entitlements to office – this is what his much-invoked distinction between person and office in bureaucracy meant.

Bureaucracy has a rational character: rules, ends, means, attention to the matter at hand [*sachlich*, also connoting “unemotional”, “dispassionate”, as opposed to emotional engagement] and impersonality govern the way it conducts itself (*WG*, p. 677).

Its “purely technical superiority” makes its forward march (*WG*, pp. 128-9, 660, 662, 671-3; *Weber*, 1920, p. 152) into ever larger areas of collective life almost inescapable (*unentrinnbar*, “inexorable”, “fated”; *Weber*, 1920, p. 150). His equation of rationality (which is part of the ideal typical identification) with the *efficiency* of bureaucracy (which is not, and cannot be an ideal typical characteristic) is of course supremely problematic, but beyond the scope of this paper.

It is the theme of modernity and the implicit periodizations in Weber’s account of bureaucracy that give rise to significant incoherences. To distinguish bureaucracy from “earlier” forms and to describe it as a “late product of development”, is not merely to set out different ideal types which may be, and demonstrably are, exemplified in administrations existing simultaneously. It is also (in the manner of nineteenth century sociology and anthropology) to distinguish “stages of historical development”. From there it is merely one further step to postulate “post-bureaucracy”: pre-bureaucracy, bureaucracy, post-bureaucracy. There is, however, no need whatever to equate ideal types with chronological sequences, as even some of the best work following Weber still does (e.g. Maravelias, Kallinikos, du Gay), and there are many compelling reasons for not doing so.

Weber’s identification of bureaucracy with modernity is, moreover, unsustainable, as evidence he himself provided shows. Nothing could be more “rational” and systematic than the hierocratic conception of the church as a papal monarchy (dealt with allusively by Weber in *WG*, Pt. II, Ch. XI). In so far as the distinction between person and office is regarded as a decisive characteristic of bureaucracy, it too was utterly conventional in the church. Weber himself described the medieval church as “a unitary rational organisation with a monarchical apex and centralised control of piety”, the pope being an “inner-worldly ruler (*Herrscher*) with a stupendous plenitude of power (*ungeheurer Machtfülle*) and [the Church having] the capacity for active regulation of lives”, unlike the eastern religions, which lack “the tautness (*Straffheit*, cf. above) of a bureaucratic organisation” (*WG*, p. 318; see also pp. 655, 658, 668). He also noted the medieval systematisation of charity, preaching and jurisdiction over heretics of the Franciscans and Dominicans, describing them as *Betriebe* serving “rational purposes in the service of the hierarchy” (*WG*, p. 318). So the papal church and various of its organs were already rational and bureaucratic in the middle ages. So was the inquisition, whose most salient characteristic was not to sadism, but addiction to routine, records and due process (Kamen, 1998).

An equally striking illustration of the “non-modern” character of “Weberian” bureaucracy is the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. Its founders in 1539 self-consciously patterned their own organisation, a most rigorously and systematically hierarchical structure (Ganss, 1991), on an ideal image of papal hierocracy. Furthermore, the organising principles of this society were indifferent to anything except suitability as

“means” to the “ends” of the society; Jesuits invariably thought in these categories. The relationship between the society and each member, moreover, was expressly construed as contractual. (For a full account see Höpfl, 2004, Ch. 2.) In short, every aspect of Weberian bureaucracy and rationality is precisely paralleled in the Society of Jesus. The mentality and motivation, the passions and the interests that were to animate the members of the society were, furthermore, explored with enormous subtlety in the society’s own writings; they might without too much exaggeration be described as an “innerworldly asceticism” (Höpfl, 2000). Weber himself referred to the *askesis* of the Jesuits (now entirely stripped of its old anti-hygienic elements) as the “perfected rational discipline for the Church’s purposes” (*WG*, p. 318, further comments pp. 643, 790). Of course the society was a “total institution”, albeit one always noted for the independence in thought and action of its members. But then the “office” has always intruded deeply into the private lives of senior civil servants, and for that matter executives of all large organisations, and any organisation aiming at permanence, even a university, will be a “normalizing machine” (Rose, 1999).

In sum, bureaucracy was not (*pace* Hales, 2002, p. 52) an “emerging form of organisation” in Weber’s time. Exemplary bureaucratic organizations and their theorizations were by then centuries old. From before 1100 AD onwards, hierocrats, defenders of papal authority against emperors and conciliarists, developed fully articulated conceptions of hierarchy (equated with Order, for which see Greenleaf, 1964); at the apex of the ecclesiastical hierarchy stands the pope, with *plenitudo potestatis*, plenitude of authority, including authority to appoint and direct all those lower down the hierarchy, within the limits of divine, natural and canon *law*. Weber noted in passing (*WG*, p. 668) various episodes in the definition of papal monarchy and hierarchy. Holy Roman Emperors and subsequently “absolute” princes claimed for themselves an authority analogous to that of the Papacy, and eventually papal authority itself. They may even have borrowed models for their administrations from there; they certainly freely borrowed ecclesiastics, for the good Weberian reason that they were better-educated and more reliable than nobles. The appropriation of papal *plenitudo potestatis* by theorists of “sovereignty” (i.e. the early modern European theory of *Herrschaft*) is evident enough. All this is obviously not an argument against Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy, still less against ideal typification as a method, but against conflating ideal typification and periodicity.

The upshot: post-bureaucracy and the Weberian ideal type

It has been argued in this paper that Weber provided no way of determining which features of bureaucracy his ideal type properly included, excluded or ignored. This defect of his method is replicated whenever bureaucracy, or post-bureaucracy, is identified by means of bullet-points or check-lists. Weber leaves us with nothing in the way of connective tissue with which to bind together the features of his ideal type, and the latter may thus contain any conceivable assemblage of possible features, provided they are not logically self-contradictory. And without a clear conception of bureaucracy, “post-bureaucracy” is indistinguishable.

The best work in the bureaucracy/post-bureaucracy literature supplies Weberian bureaucracy with precisely such a theory. What is needed is some more sophisticated way of relating the organisation to the members whose conduct is shaped by it (Maravelias, 2003, p. 551). This requires, among other things, some conception of

motivation. Weber himself, without developing the point, treated motivation in bureaucrats in terms of “interests”, that is to say incentives and sanctions, material, emotional or spiritual, which bureaucracy dovetails with the allocation and co-ordination of tasks. It is this that makes bureaucracy “efficient” or “rational” from a “purely technical point of view” (*WG*, p. 660), that is reliable and predictable from the point of view of governors (*WG*, p. 659). More sensitive and sophisticated conceptions of motivation and of the organisation-individual relationship than this are conceivable. But irrespective of what account is offered, relations of command and obedience, control and compliance, authority and acknowledgement of authority, and specialisation of tasks – in sum, hierarchy – are intrinsic to relations between human beings organised into any but the smallest and/or most ephemeral of collective undertakings. Whoever says organisation says hierarchy, to coin a phrase. An entirely non- or post-bureaucratic organisation without hierarchy is simply inconceivable.

So, if “Weberian bureaucracy” is equated in the old way with hierarchy, elements of bureaucracy are bound to be found in any organisation. It will also be easy enough to identify non-bureaucratic (i.e. non-hierarchical) elements. But why invoke Weber for this, when his ideal type of bureaucracy certainly encompasses much more than merely hierarchy?

However, bureaucracy may be conceptualised in ways that go well beyond merely theorizing one sort of hierarchy or another. du Gay and Kallinikos have provided elegant examples of this. Such revised conceptions of bureaucracy can accommodate organisational innovations of the most diverse kinds, sometimes positively counter-intuitively from Weber’s perspective. But if bureaucracy is inherently flexible, for example, and is compatible with all manner of different arrangements, then what have been diagnosed as “post-bureaucratic” arrangements must appear as merely variants within bureaucracy. Equally, if bureaucracy distinguishes persons and roles, and if “post-bureaucratic” arrangements in effect do the same, what has been seen as post- or non-bureaucracy again becomes merely a variant of bureaucracy: total “control” or “domination” of individuals by organizations is impossible even in Arendtian totalitarian regimes, and certainly does not occur in supposedly “post-bureaucratic” modes of organisation where some have claimed to find it (Maravelias, 2003).

In the light of all this, it is not surprising that bureaucracy/post-bureaucracy discussions have generally concluded that both bureaucracy and “modernity” continue, albeit not quite as we have known them. Given this point of reference, the advent of “post-bureaucracy” would require either the complete disappearance of hierarchies, which is inconceivable, or the identification of some arrangements as inherently incompatible with bureaucracy, and it hard to see how this could be shown. Weberian periodisation meanwhile continues unabated and, with rare exceptions such as McSweeney (in this issue), largely un-interrogated.

Note

1. Often translated as “domination”, which in ordinary English carries irremovable connotations of tyranny or oppression. But for Weber it was merely a term for ruling (Lassman and Speirs, 1994, Glossary). *Herrscher* was his most usual personal substantive from it, but he often used the etymologically prior *Herr*; both terms were deliberate archaisms, the latter sometimes with Weber’s undecidable inverted commas. Mommsen’s

rationale for rendering Herrschaft as “domination” (1974, p. 72, fn. 1) depends on a strange reading of how “authority” functions in modern English; Weber’s translators Roth and Wittich also use “domination”, but revert to “authority” in Ch.III.3.

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