The legacy of Max Weber

This passion for bureaucracy... is enough to drive one to despair.

Max Weber

To speak about bureaucracy, as many nowadays love to do, is to engage the central concern of Max Weber. Preoccupied with understanding the distinctively individual or unique character of the present historical phase, Weber was convinced that modern bourgeois reality is marked by an unprecedented "passion for bureaucracy." In no previous country or historical period has existence come to be so absolutely confined within calculating, rationalized forms of organization. Their scope and influence tend to become universal. Everywhere houses of bureaucratic serfdom are being constructed and finished; the advance of bureaucracy seems irreversible.

Weber was of course aware that the bureaucratization of modern existence was not without precedent. Through a great variety of complex processes, all former civilizations successfully rationalized particular areas of daily life. The rational calculation of architectural stress and arching patterns, for example, was clearly evident in the medieval Gothic vault; rationalized forms of bookkeeping appeared in the ancient Mediterranean and Near East, as well as in India and China; Roman jurisprudence and legal practice were inscribed within rigorous and calculating schemata of argumentation; the beginnings of military discipline, with its prohibition of fighting out of line, were already displayed among the heavily armed Hellenic and Roman foot soldiers; the Renaissance elevation of the rationally calculated experiment to a key principle of scientific inquiry was preceded by the war technology and mathematically astronomical of Hellenic antiquity, the techniques of experimentation in Indian yoga, and the mining operations of the Middle Ages. Moreover, numerous social formations have in the past organized themselves through highly developed and quantitatively large bureaucratic organizations: Egypt during the period of the new Empire; the Roman Catholic Church, especially from the end of the thirteenth century; China from the time of Shi Huangdi; and so on. In the face of these well-known examples Weber nevertheless insisted that modern, occidental processes of bureaucratization are without precedent. Their fundamental novelty lies in the fact that they tend to penetrate and capture all realms of life. The modern civilizing process is virtually identical with the development of calculating, bureaucratic organization. The whole of life falls under the sway of "formal" or purportive rationality - goal-oriented conduct that is guided by the spirit of calculation and abstract-general rules, and that therefore reduces its fields of operation to objects of administration. Under conditions of total bureaucratization, voluntary associations and value-oriented relations of mutual agreement are increasingly subverted and replaced by purportively rational organizations. These strive to realize their respective goals by way of the definition and regulation of all situations as problems, which subsequently can be solved through computation and reckoning. In short, the champions and defenders of bureaucratization struggle to "disenchance" the world, to rid it of all inestimable, mysterious forces. It is assumed that all events and things can be defined, monitored, and controlled through bureaucratic means and calculations.

Weber's account of the unique realities of modern life, it must be emphasized, does not presume that the proliferation of bureaucratic conduct is identical with the modernization process. He insists that his own discussion of the specificity or individuality of modern bourgeois life tends to be one-sided. Like all comparative inquiries, its emphases are selective, structured by judgments about the significance of contemporaneous bureaucratic domination. These judgments positively determine the goals and methods of inquiry into bureaucratic forms. By way of these judgments, bureaucratic organizations are estimated to be characteristic of the contemporary world, setting it apart from all previous sociohistorical formations. Conversely, these judgments exclude a rich infinity of general and particular aspects of life under modern conditions. This point is of great importance to the following essay. Simply, Weber's analysis does not pose as an exhaustive description of the dynamics of the bureaucratization process. It does not claim to depict or reproduce conceptually the "really real" content and form of modern bureaucratic reality. Its concern to clarify and understand this reality instead systematically relies upon ideal-typical categories. These one-sidedly emphasize and scrutinize certain characteristic features of bureaucracy. Weber continually emphasizes that there can be no presuppositionless representation of bureaucratic processes that somehow allow themselves to be fully disclosed. These processes can be observed, analyzed, or criticized only through methods of inquiry that depend upon a series of conceptual abstractions. His account of bureaucratic rationality is thus avowedly selective, conditioned by the mode of contemporary historical interest in understanding that rationality.

Guided by this premise, Weber analyzes at least four elements common to modern bureaucratic institutions. These elements, to repeat, are by no means expressed in their pure form anywhere within the landscape of modern life. They nevertheless together constitute (in his view) the most highly significant attributes peculiar to all contemporary public and private bureaucratic organizations. In the first place, bureaucracy can be analyzed as an ensemble of consistent, methodically prepared, and precisely executed relations of command
and obedience. Relations between “subjects” within the organizational hierarchy are ordered firmly, and in accordance with the necessary principle of appointment and supervision from above. These subjects are “unsparingly and exclusively set for carrying out the command.”

Bureaucracy constitutes an objective matrix of power, into which officials (and their clients) at all levels are slotted, by which their activity is structured, and according to which they are to be depoliticized and governed anonymously as beings who “need order and nothing but order.” Within all spheres of the organization, subordinates are expected to rely upon the initiative and problem-solving ability of their superiors. As a system of organized inequality, bureaucratic organization therefore thrives on the suspension of all personal criticism, passive obedience, faith in authority, and attention to directives among the subordinated. Nervous and helpless when severed from their organization, individuals become organization people, whose one ideal in life is to conform. They become single cogs who strive for bigger jobs within an ever-moverng and more or less precisely functioning apparatus, whose course, in turn, can be altered only by those (bureaucrats) at the very top. Bureaucratic administration is therefore crucially premised upon the concentration of the means of production, war, and administration in the hands of those who govern. In turn, those who deploy and administer these means consider the world and all that is within it a mere object of their concern. Bureaucracy always subsists and expands through bureaucrats.

These relations of subordination, secondly, are subject to rigorous internal differentiation, that is, are structured in conformity with a usually complex division of tasks or offices. The rules specifying these tasks are typically calculated through empirical observation, guided by such considerations as the minimum of costs, and spelled out in written documents. The skillful, efficient operation of bureaucratic organizations such as the factory or the department store depends upon rational and continuous specialization. Within the bureaucratic apparatus, the activities of speaking, interacting, and laboring staff are subject to continuous administrative discretion from above. Each level and sphere of activity is compartmentalized, governed by particular rules of action. These rules specify the requisite qualifications and duties necessary for staff employed at each level or post within the organization: Those who occupy positions of command, for example, tend to be expertly trained; all are to obtain remuneration and material advantages in accordance with the degree of privilege of their condition of existence within the organization; and so on. Although these rules are to a greater or lesser extent subject to change, an office and its corresponding rules of operation tend to continue in existence beyond the life of its incumbent. The “bearers” and clients of bureaucratic organization are compelled to consider it their duty to act in conformity with these rules.

Bureaucratic forms of organization, thirdly, are marked with a definite impersonality. “Without regard for particular persons and situations” is a watchword of bureaucracy. Bureaucratic relations of power are systems of formal, depersonalized rationality. They are guided by abstract-general regulations, which are applied exhaustively and consistently to every case. All bureaucratic adminis-
of the machine. The modern bourgeois world is a calculating, mechanized world. Its dominant, machinelike institutions depend for their functioning and coordination on strictly objective and technical expertise, itself more and more trained within bureaucratically organized scientific research institutes of the universities. Compared with the achievement capacities of other forms of organization (such as patriarchal and patrimonial systems of administration), mechanized, expertly guided bureaucracy — especially in its monocratic form — is unsurpassed. It seeks, in principle, to calculate everything rationally. Typically depending upon specialized knowledge and concrete information relevant to its performance, bureaucracy is qualitatively more precise, unambiguous, flexible, smoothly operating, and cost-efficient than other forms. "Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs...trained bureaucracy is superior on all these points." Under modern conditions, and exactly because of these qualities, bureaucracy ensures its own relentless advance, just as the modern machine irresistibly guarantees its own triumph over various inferior forms of manual production. In comparison with other, less technically efficient forms of organization, bureaucracy is distinguished therefore by its much greater inescapability.

Modern capitalism

The subtle depth and exactness of Weber’s discussion of bureaucratic rationality undergo something of a dissipation in the foregoing introduction. The claims of his discussion must be analyzed in considerably more detail, and with particular reference to the modern spheres of society and state. To begin with, it is only under modern conditions, Weber insists, that there have emerged highly specialized, bureaucratic capitalist enterprises that deploy fixed capital and "free" labor power. Large capitalist enterprises have become the historically unequalled model of the bureaucratic mode of organization. Interlocking networks of these organizations form an immense, and apparently unshakeable, cosmos, an institutionally differentiated market economy in accordance with whose rules of action individuals are pressured to conform: In the struggle for the satisfaction of desires for "utilities," those who do not follow suit either go out of business or are flung into the ranks of the unemployed. Breaking down traditional habits of life, subjecting the whole world to its bureaucratic administration, the capitalist mode of production constitutes itself as "that force in modern life which has most influence on our destinies."

Under these conditions dictated by the capitalist market economy, Weber stresses, the single corporation is compelled to discharge its official business continuously, precisely, unambiguously, and with as much speed and cost efficiency as possible. In respect of its permanently rationalizing tendencies, the capitalist mode of production is not synonymous with irrational speculation, with the reckless and unscrupulous pursuit of profit. Weber rejects the associations (proposed by Simmel’s Philosophie des Geldes, for example) of acquisition through a money economy with capitalism. In the first place, from a technical point of view, the reliance upon money entails the most rational means of orienting economic activity. Moreover, the uncontrolled release of impulses greedy for gold may well be as old as the history of the species. Such dastardly acquisitiveness has often appeared, indeed, as the underside of strongly traditional societies: "The inner attitude of the adventurer, whichPref 34 ated at all ethical limitations, has been universal." At any rate, entrepreneurial adventurers have for ages and in all parts of the world operated as speculators and financiers in wars, piracy, and contracts of all kinds. Absolute unscrupulousness and avarice bear little resemblance to modern capitalism, and brigands, pirates, usurers, and large merchants bear still less to its spirit.

Under modern conditions, it is true, reckless avarice and speculation continue. Modern capitalism by no means eradicates what Weber calls "speculative" calculations — those oriented to possibilities whose realization is more or less fortuitous, and therefore in a certain sense incalculable. Modern capitalist firms, for example, heedlessly consume natural resources, for which there are often no substitutes. Those directing or sharing in the fortunes of profit-making enterprises also continue to be motivated by risk taking, ambition, and opportunities for large income from profitable undertakings. And the monopolistic struggle for economic gain through territorial annexations — imperialist capitalism — continues to play a crucial and destabilizing role in modern life. As a consequence of all these factors, capitalist firms, monopolies, and trusts are necessarily institutions of limited duration. Weber was nevertheless convinced that modern capitalism tends to tame or moderate the backward irrationality of speculative ventures. Although the dangers of economic crisis have by no means disappeared, their relative importance has diminished, precisely because of continuing capitalist attempts to rationalize production, prices, turnover, and sources of credit.

Inasmuch as its activities are bureaucratically organized on the basis of rigorous foresight and continuous calculation, the modern capitalist enterprise also overcome the privileged traditionalism of the guild craftsman, the hand-to-mouth mode of life of the peasant, and the occasional capital accounting made by precapitalist traveling merchants (such as the commenda). Under capitalist economic conditions, Weber emphasizes, private enterprises are subject to the more generalized imperatives of bureaucratic rationalization. In order to avoid going under in the market struggle, corporations must avoid operating in accordance with the reckless and unmediated logic of profitability. Unlike the infamous Dutch sea captain who was prepared to scorch his sails in hell just for the sake of gain, capitalist entrepreneurs must rather conduct their operations in accordance with the greater foresight and caution associated with the bureaucratic, rationally calculated pursuit of profit. Industrial capitalist enterprises systematically pursue profit through relations of exchange and by means of ongoing calculations that have monopolistic effects. Under contemporary conditions, the organizing principle of the social exchange with outer nature is "capital calculations" in monetary terms. These calculations are associated with corporate attempts to plan and administer nature, material goods, and labor power bureaucratically as means of profitable acquisition. The corporate orientation to