

Classical Sociological Theory
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Lecture No. 40
Bureaucracy

Welcome back to the class, let us continue with the discussion on Max Weber, we are almost halfway through with the discussion on Max Weber. In the previous class, we discussed his the most famous work of Max Weber, The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism, a book widely considered as one of the most important contribution of Max Weber, in which he try to explore a host of theoretical issues through a very fascinating empirical as well as historical analysis.

I hope that you followed the class, you understood the argument and how he makes a connection, between the rise of modern capitalism in Europe and a particular religious outlook or religious influence that he called as Protestant ethic, a particular worldview, a particular theoretical influence emerges from the Protestant groups, especially Calvinism and influenced by others. So, as I mentioned in the class, this book is also widely seen as a dialogue between Karl Marx and Max Weber. In today's class, we are moving to analyze, yet another very important concept of Max Weber, known as Bureaucracy. And we know that this term is a very familiar, we use this term in our everyday parlance as we come across bureaucracy in our mundane life.

The institution of bureaucracy is very important in our political as well as professional, socio economic life. We experience bureaucracy, in our everyday life and we are sometimes critical of that. But yet we know that we cannot do without a bureaucratic setup. So, Weber has very interesting theorization on bureaucracy, especially on its historically unique character, it's very specific forms of rationality, its efficiency, the way in which it is organized and of course, he was also critical of that. So, let us spend time, some time trying to understand Max Weber's exposition on bureaucracy.

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- Weber was interested in bureaucracy as it is the “the purest type of exercise of legal authority,” in the modern world.
- The process of modernization, for Weber, is a process of bureaucratization. Modern society is fundamentally and inevitably a bureaucratic society.
- The state, in particular, Weber emphasizes, “is absolutely dependent upon a bureaucratic basis.” The growth of “bureaucratic officialdom,” he observes, has been the “unambiguous yardstick for the modernization of the state.”
- Weber’s concept of bureaucracy is an ideal type, an abstraction constructed to underline the rational properties of bureaucratic administration and highlight the contrast between bureaucratic rule and traditional rule.



Weber was interested in bureaucracy as it is the purest type of exercise of legal authority in the modern world. And his interest in this setup or this arrangement of bureaucracy was not only emerging from his keen interest to understand this particular arrangement per say, but he argued that this really epitomizes so this really represents the purest type of exercise of legal authority. And here, we need to go back to the previous classes, where we discussed about at least 3 major types of authority that Weber mentions about; one is the traditional authority, second one is the charismatic authority and the third one is legal rational authority.

I hope you remember the classes, if not, please, go back and refer to those classes because they are extremely important. Weber talks about 3 major ideal types of authorities, from where the legitimacy, the power derives its legitimacy, the one is from the traditional authority, where the tradition itself provides legitimacy to certain forms of behavior, certain authority, certain power. Second one is charismatic authority, emerging from the exceptional person which breaks almost every existing rules on power and authority and other things.

And the third one, the most important one for Weber was the legal rational authority, where he elaborates its features, they are impersonal, it uninfluenced or uncontaminated by the elements of emotion or tradition and other things. So for Weber, bureaucracy really represents the purest form of exercise of legal authority.

The process of modernization for Weber is a process of bureaucratization. Modern society is fundamentally and inevitably a bureaucratic society. And this is an extremely important argument, because he is connecting modernization, of course with a number of other themes. But for him, the most important feature of modernization is the process of bureaucratization. And Weber provides a much expansive understanding of bureaucratization taking it from a very limited understanding about how state apparatus is bureaucratic, and that is how we understand it in our common parlance.

But for Weber this bureaucratization has permeated into each and every spheres of modern human society, that is why for him, the process of modernization is nothing but a process of bureaucratization. Modern society is fundamentally and inevitably bureaucratic society. And he would say that modern societies is incompatible with traditional values like tradition or charismatic authority, because there are quite a lot of inherent contradictions within the value orientations themselves.

The state in particular, Weber emphasizes is absolutely dependent upon a bureaucratic basis, and which we know that for sure how it exists, every modern nation state is built on an elaborate a gigantic system of bureaucracy, starting with the, maybe the chief secretary at the state level, to the representative of the state at the grassroots level at the lowest level, the state, in the price is a mammoth bureaucratic enterprise.

The growth of bureaucratic officialdom, he observes, has been the unambiguous yardstick of the modernization of the state. So, this bureaucratic officialdom, where the, a particular set of an exclusive set of officials in the Indian context, we know, the IAS officers are the epitome of Indian bureaucracy, given the amount of competition involved, the extent of competition to clear civil service examinations and the kind of prestige and power associated with the position of IAS because, they are considered to be the most important components of this bureaucratic system.

So, the growth of bureaucratic officialdom, he observes, has been the unambiguous yardstick of modernization of the state. So, he would analyze or evaluate the extent of modernization of a state on the basis of the extent of its bureaucratization. Weber's concept of bureaucracy is an ideal type and abstraction constructed to underline the rational properties of bureaucratic administration and highlight the contrast between bureaucratic rule and traditional rule.

And I hope you remember our discussion on ideal type, Weber gives a definition of ideal type and he presents it as a methodological tool, he talks about historical ideal type and general ideal type. So, in order to just have a very quick recap, he argues that you must be able to create an ideal type of a social phenomenon either a historical event or a historical trait or a general ideal type. And this ideal type helps you as a perfect example, against which you can compare the kind of examples that you have with you and in the previous class, I gave you the example of a perfect student.

So we may not be able to point out somebody as a perfect student or the perfect student, but we all know that these are all examples of an ideal type, where it helps us to evaluate an ordinary doctor or student whom we meet in our everyday life and then to compare it and then to contrast it. And to see to what extent this particular person embodies the kind of qualities and features of this ideal type. And Weber is very clear that it is only purely an ideological or an ideal construction. It never exists, you will never find an ideal typical situation or category in anywhere in reality.

So, Weber concept of bureaucracy is an ideal type, an abstraction constructed to underline the rational properties of bureaucratic administration and highlight the contrast between bureaucratic rule and traditional rule. So, if you contrast the functioning of bureaucratic rule or an ideal type of bureaucratic administration, and then ideal type of traditional administration, you will see what the kind of contrasting differences are and that is the purpose of Weber in creating or constructing this ideal type.

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Key features



- **Formalism.** Bureaucracy exhibits a high level of formalism insofar as official business is conducted on the basis of written rules, administrative regulations, and fixed procedures.

The rational formalism of bureaucracy requires that administrative actions be handled in a uniform fashion—by the book—not on an individual, case-by-case basis and not according to the personal predilections of bureaucratic officials.



So, what are the important features? The first one is a Formalism. Bureaucracy exhibits a high level of formalism, insofar as official business is conducted on the basis of written rules, administrative regulations and fixed procedures. The rational formalism of bureaucracy requires that the administrative actions be handled in a uniform fashion by the book, not on an individual case by case basis, and not according to the personal predilections of bureaucratic officials.

And this is something extremely important. And we know that when we talk about the bureaucracy, we often attribute quite a lot of rigidity with that, we know that we have often heard that bureaucrats are supposed to follow the rules in a very strict manner, they are not supposed to deviate from that. They cannot really take decisions on the basis of their own discretion, the discretionary powers of bureaucrats are very limited, it does not mean that they are completely or absolutely not permitted, but the range of their discretion is very limited.

The important argument of Weber is that bureaucracy is characterized by formalism, everything is well documented, there is no informality available and you are supposed to strictly follow the written down rules and those who are familiar with the governance services or a private corporation and the other things, know that when once you take a particular job, our rules and our service conditions, for example, are strictly governed by very specific rules. So, each and every action is actually rule bound.

So, Weber argues that this formalism is a very important feature of bureaucracy, it exhibits a high level of formalism, insofar as official business is conducted on the basis of written rules, administrative regulations, and fixed procedures. And a number of examples, if you want to buy something, if it is, say if it is below some 50,000 Rupee, a particular officer can go ahead with that. But if it is between 50,000 and then 5 lakh, then that order must get ratified by his, his superior, his superior. And if the order is beyond 5 lakh then it must go to a purchase committee.

So, there are very specifically well laid out rules for each and every aspect. So, that is why the rational formalism of bureaucracy requires that administrative actions be handled in a uniform fashion by the book, not on an individual case by case basis, and not according to the personal predilections of bureaucratic officials. And this is an extremely important point, because it is a chair of the bureaucrat, which actually decides what are the rules and rules and other things that this particular officer is bound to follow.

Therefore, the freedom provided to a particular officer per se is very limited. And keep in mind, these are all ideal typical arguments. We know that, that is not how it happens, you will come across officials who are more forthcoming, who flout the rules, who have a much larger understanding of the freedom associated, but for Weber, this is how he characterizes the essential features of bureaucracy.

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- **Impersonality.** Bureaucratic officials, in adherence to their vocational demands, perform their functions in a purely objective and matter-of-fact manner, in accordance with “calculable rules” and “without regard to personal considerations.”



- Weber argues, the more fully developed the bureaucracy, “the more it is ‘dehumanized,’ the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculation.” The impersonality of the market economy has its counterpart in the impersonality of bureaucratic administration.



Then the second one is impersonality. Bureaucratic officials, Weber argues in adherence to their vocational demands, perform their function in a purely objective and matter of fact manner, in accordance with the “calculable rules” and “without regard to personal considerations”!. And this is another very important one, one, the first one we discuss, already discussed, it is formalism.

Second one is impersonality. So, the person who occupies a particular chair, a chair of a chief secretary or chair of a district collector does not matter. Because the chair or that position requires a person to behave in a certain manner. A person cannot bring in his or her personal ideas, their proclivities, their ideological inclinations, their personal opinions, their biases, they are not supposed to bring that. They are supposed to purely follow the rules and regulations in a purely objective and matter of fact, manner in accordance with the calculable rules, and without regard to personal considerations.

Weber argues that the more fully developed the bureaucracy, the more it is dehumanized. The more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business, business love, hatred, and all purely personal irrational and emotional elements, which escaped calculation. The impersonality of the market economy has its counterpart in the impersonality of bureaucratic administration.

So, here Weber is elaborating the idea of impersonal character of bureaucracy, he says that the more it is bureaucratized, it is the more it is dehumanized. It is supposed to have been free from

all human character, because when you are sitting on a chair and a file comes to you are about a particular person's plight, and you are really convinced about the situation of that particular person, you really want to help, but then there could be some technical glitch, there could be some technical problem which prevents you from doing that. And then you are supposed to follow the technical rule.

So, Weber argues or host of other scholars have argued that a completely absolute bureaucratic system is a completely dehumanized one, you will not find any human qualities, you will not find any space for any human qualities of love, compassion or generosity, or adjustment or these qualities do not have any place in a bureaucratic setup. So, the more it completely succeeds in eliminating from official business, love, hatred and all purely personal, irrational and emotional elements, which escape calculation.

The impersonality of the market economy has its counterpart in the impersonality of bureaucratic administration. So he argues that when capitalism emerges, it assumes the character of a completely impersonal market economy, because market or economy, according to Weber, is yet another form of completely or complete absolute rational behavior.

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• **Predictability.** Bureaucracy, Weber states, permits a "high degree of calculability of results," both for those heading the organization and "for those acting in relation to it."

• The capitalist market economy depends on the existence of a stable and predictable governing system, and this is precisely what bureaucratic administration offers.



Then the third one is predictability. Bureaucracy, Weber states, permits a high degree of calculability of results, both for those heading the organization, and for those who are acting in relation to that. You know how bureaucratic organizations work, so it actually gives you a sense

of certainty and predictability over the organization. For example, if a chief secretary issues an order, the chief secretary exactly knows that how that it has to be circulated, when will it reach the top, the lower bottom person and how it will be implemented, because he knows how this this system of bureaucracy functions.

So, there is an important element of calculability in that, because the rules are well laid out, the hierarchy is well laid out, the flow of information is clearly well established. So all these things actually produce a kind of calculability and predictability, a 'high degree of calculability of results', both of these heading the organization, and 'for those who are acting in relation to it'.

The capitalist market economy depends on the existence of a stable and predictable governing system, and this is precisely what bureaucratic administration offers. So, the capitalist market economy depends on the existence of a stable and predictable governing system. I hope you remember this point, when Weber talks about the structural conditions for the emergence of capitalism, we came across this point that every business, every capitalist would require a stable set of rules.

There could be some changes here and there, but everybody wants a stable political atmosphere, no investor will be willing to invest their money, if he or she knows that the political climate is going to be chaotic, they want complete stability, at least clarity in terms of the legal and political provisions of that particular place.

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- **Knowledge.** The rationality of bureaucracy derive also from its reliance on a staff consisting of knowledgeable professionals and technical specialists.
- The process of bureaucratization gives rise to a social order characterized by “the ever-increasing importance of experts and specialized knowledge” and by an “absolute and complete dependence” on a “specially trained organization of officials.”
- Bureaucratic administration, Weber states, “means fundamentally domination through knowledge.”



The fourth important feature that Weber talks about is knowledge. Rationality of bureaucracy derives also from its reliance on a staff consisting of knowledgeable professionals and technical specialists. And this division of labor, on the basis of the knowledge and we know that usually we say that people are appointed on the basis of their efficiency. In a modern, industrial advanced society, we know that we have extreme form of division of labor people who have specialized in some of the narrowest or fields of specialization.

So bureaucracy, Weber argues is based on highly specialized forms of knowledge. The rationality of bureaucracy derives also from its reliance on a staff consisting of knowledgeable professionals. So, an ordinary layperson is not entrusted with the the task of bureaucracy, but it is for knowledgeable professionals and technical specialists. The process bureaucratization gives rise to social order characterized by “the ever increasing importance of experts and specialized knowledge” and by an “absolute and complete dependence on a specially trained organization of officials”.

So, it is a group of people who have expertized in a given area, and this organization is hierarchically arranged, the flow of communication is well decided, well defined. And all these characteristics really shape what it means to a system of bureaucracy, gives rise to social order, characterized by the ever increasing importance of experts and specialized knowledge. And by an absolute and complete dependence on a specially trained organization of officials.

Bureaucratic administration, Weber states “means fundamentally domination through knowledge”. We know that in modern state, this knowledge gets manifested through technical knowledge, through data that you collect about the people, the kind of legal and political components of the rules that are already framed, and then a host of forms of knowledge about the administrative system, its various components, its various dynamics and a lot of other stuff.

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• **Efficiency.** An office hierarchy consisting of well-defined channels of authority and lines of supervision and by the presence of a trained staff of career officials with specialized areas of competence.



• continuity, stability, reliability, and consistency.- The ‘human machine’

• **Indispensability.** Bureaucracy, the purest embodiment of formal rationality, is an indispensable feature of modern society. It is a uniquely efficient mechanism for administering the collective affairs of society.

• Bureaucracy, Weber argues, is “escape proof” and “practically indestructible.”



So, the fifth point that Weber brings forward is that of efficiency. An office hierarchy consisting of well-defined channels of authority and lines of supervision, and the presence of a trained staff of career officials with a specialized areas of competence. So, bureaucracy presents you with utmost clarity in terms of the organization structure, there will not be two officials having the same position, and therefore any kind of conflict of interest is never allowed.

The authority structure who is superior to whom, and who is subordinate to whom, these rules are very clearly laid out. So, the flow of communication, who has to issue a notice and how it has to be routed, we know that a letter is routed through somebody. When a principal writes a letter to a faculty member, so it has to be routed to the head of the department. Even if that letter is directly addressed to a faculty member, it has to be routed through the head of the department because head of the department is seen as superior to that of the faculty and seen as somebody who is in between the faculty and the principal.

So, an official hierarchy consisting of well-defined channels of authority and the lines of supervision and also lines of communication, and by the presence of a trained staff of career officials with specialized areas of competence. So they insist, they ensure continuity, stability, reliability and consistency. Human becomes a kind of a “human machine”. It is a machine composed of human beings, it is a well-oiled machinery, it is supposed to be very efficient, it is supposed to be very continuous, a stable, reliable and consistent.

And I do not think that I need to remind you that when it comes to this point, we increasingly know that it is an ideal type. Because bureaucracy, at least in India is also quite often associated with lack of efficiency. We say that our bureaucratic enterprise is completely inefficient. It is corrupt, it is full of nepotism, it is full of lazy officers, and who often gets things delayed.

If you give a complaint or a petition to the government officials, it will be kept somewhere, it will accumulate dust for years. But we know that Weber is not talking about the exact empirical condition, rather, he is talking about the ideal typical condition.

The next important feature is indispensability. Bureaucracy, the purest embodiment of formal rationality is an indispensable feature of modern society. It is a uniquely efficient mechanism for administering collective affairs of society. So, Weber would even argue that you do not have anything to replace bureaucracy. Do we have anything to replace the system of bureaucracy? Have you thought about anything? Can you think of anything that can replace bureaucracy?

We say that it is very corrupt. It is very inefficient. It is full of favoritism and then red tapism. But do we have any other alternative forms of organization that can be used to replace bureaucracy? it is impossible, we have not found anything so far, we can make the bureaucracy less cluttered, less rigid and more flexible, that is all fine. But this overall logic of this organization and arrangement is very hard to replace.

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- While Weber is ambivalent about its social and personal effects, He sees the professional bureaucrat chained by his apparatus, as once established bureaucracies are difficult to abolish.

- Moreover, the bureaucracy can work for anyone in control of it. whether it be a democratically elected leader or a dictator.

- 'Dehumanizing nature', 'red tapism' etc



Bureaucracy, Weber argues, is escape proof and practically indestructible. So, Weber is extremely clear about it. He is very clear that you cannot really do away or wish away bureaucracy because it epitomizes some of the essential features of modern society. You cannot replace bureaucracy with something else, he says that it is impossible in a modern era, because this modernity is characterized by some of the important values that are inherent in a bureaucratic system, all these values that we discussed.

So in a traditional society, in a tribal society, or in a feudal society, you can think of other forms organization, but in a modern society, where rationality is the most important form of value, you cannot have any other system of governance other than bureaucracy. While Weber is ambivalent about the social and personal effects of bureaucracy, he has no alternative for it.

So, while Weber is ambivalent about its social and personal effects, he sees that the professional bureaucrat chained by his apparatus, as once established, bureaucrats are difficult to abolish. So Weber, while understands that it is an inescapable situation, he is also of familiar with the negative aspects of bureaucracy.

Because I do not think that any system of bureaucracies are free of criticism. When you have such an inhuman mechanism in place, when people are appointed to very important positions, and when they wield so much of power, then the system is bound to become lethargic and corrupt.

Weber is ambivalent about the social and personal effects, he sees the professional bureaucrat chained by his apparatus, as once established bureaucracies are very difficult to abolish. And you also must be knowing quite a lot of stuff about say many bureaucrats feeling in a fed up with the whole system and they coming out of the old system and feeling and thinking that they can do far better if they are outside of this bureaucratic setup.

Moreover, the bureaucracy can work for anyone in control of it, whether it may be democratically elected leader or a dictator, this is another very important point. So, we cannot assume that bureaucracy, because of its all efficiency and will always have positive effects. You can have an extremely ruthless bureaucratic system, who will silently obey its most ruthless leader and the German Holocaust, the way in which the Nazis executed the final solution stands a testimony to that even now researchers are really wondering how that ordinary human beings, you must have heard about this argument of this 'banality of evil', by Hannah Arendt implying the capacity of ordinary people to involve in violence in most mundane and banal ways.

Arendt talks about how an ordinary police person can become so ruthless in killing ordinary people. So, why didn't a policeman in the German Nazi group think critically? How didnt not think critically and acted in a mechanical manner to execute, kill, put people into gas chambers and then kill thousands of people per day. So, this bureaucratic system, while it can be quite efficient, it can be quite efficient in the negative sense as well. That is why Weber acknowledges this whole criticism as a "red tapism" and "dehumanizing nature" when talking about bureaucracy.

It is an inhuman system and you have heard quite a lot of stories about that even in critical situations which requires urgent intervention, a bureaucratic system need not work. It has to pass through the very specific stages, it has to go through from one officer to the other and finally by the time the order comes, the needy person might have died. Speedy decision making with compassion, with discretion are not the hallmark of bureaucracy.

This whole issue of nepotism, red tapism, favoritism, corruption, are all part of bureaucracy. But once again Weber's concern is that bureaucracy epitomizes all the important values and features of a modern society and you cannot really help. As long as you have modern legal rational authority in place, its system of execution has to be bureaucracy and nothing else. So, let us stop here, and we will meet for the next class.