

Max Weber on Social “Bureaucratization”: Excerpt from a Debate at the Conference of the Association for Social Politics in Vienna (1909)

Abstract

The sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) warns here against the “bureaucratization” of German society. Weber had written elsewhere that modern industrial societies had created an “iron cage” of bureaucracies and economic relations, which loom over every human being. As a liberal, Weber perceived a danger in the growing organization of society.

Source

The technical superiority of the bureaucratic mechanism is utterly clear, as unshakably clear as the technical superiority of machine tools in comparison with manual work. However, when the “Association for Social Policy” was founded in 1873, it was Privy Councilor Wagner’s generation that called for standards other than purely technical ones; back then, that generation was just as small in numbers as we dissenters are now in comparison with you. Back then, dear gentlemen, you had to fight against the thunderous applause in favor of the purely technological achievements of industrial mechanization that were represented by the Manchester doctrine in those days. Today, it seems to me that you yourselves run the risk of turning into precisely such a salvo of applause in favor of the mechanized system in administration and politics. For in the end what else have we come to hear from you? Imagine the consequences of the kind of extensive bureaucratization and nationalization that we can already see looming ahead. Already today in the private companies of big industry as well as each and every economic enterprise organized along modern lines, the submission to computation – that sort of rational calculation – is extending all the way down to the lowest level. It turns every single worker into a small cog in this machine and increasingly prepares him or her to feel that way psychologically and to only ask whether it is possible to go from being a small cog to a bigger one. Take as the tip of the pyramid the authoritarian powers of the state or the municipality within a monarchical state system. That will remind you vividly of the system of the old Egyptians in antiquity, which was saturated, from top to bottom, by the spirit of the “little job.” To this day, there has never been a bureaucracy that could have come even close to Egyptian bureaucracy. This is absolutely clear to anyone familiar with Egyptian administrative history and it is just as utterly clear that today we are rushing inexorably towards a development that follows precisely this model, albeit on a different basis: on a technically refined, more rationalized, i.e., on a far more mechanized basis. The question we are concerned with, though, is not: How can we change something about this development? – For that is impossible to do. Instead the question is: What are the consequences? We are quite prepared to acknowledge that honorable and talented people are working at the highest level of our civil service; we are willing to concede that despite all the exceptions, such people have an opportunity to rise within the hierarchy of the civil service, just as the universities, for example, see it as their task to offer, despite all the exceptions, a chance for talented individuals, an opportunity for them to distinguish themselves. Yet as dreadful as the thought may seem that the world might one day be populated entirely by professors – surely we would escape to the desert if this were to happen –, even more dreadful is the idea that the world should be filled with nothing but small cogs, that is, nothing but people who are glued to little jobs, striving towards a little job that is just a bit bigger. This constitutes a state of affairs that one increasingly encounters, just as in the papyrus scrolls of antiquity, in the spirit of today’s civil service and, above all, among its new generation, our present-day students. The kind of passion for bureaucratization such as we have heard you express here is frankly enough to

drive one to despair. It is as if in politics the obsession with orderliness, along whose lines the average German seems to manage best anyway, were given exclusive reins; it is as if we should knowingly and deliberately become humans who need “order” and nothing but order; who become nervous and cowardly when that order teeters for just one moment, and helpless when torn out of their exclusive conformism to that order. We are in the midst of a development anyhow, as a result of which the world will know nothing but such order-seekers. Therefore, the central question is not how to foster and accelerate this trend even further but what means we have at our disposal to counter this machinery in order to protect the rest of humanity from this partitioning of the soul, from this absolute rule of the bureaucratic ethos.

Source: Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik*. Tübingen, 1924. p. 413f; reprinted in Gerhard A. Ritter and Jürgen Kocka, eds., *Deutsche Sozialgeschichte 1870–1914. Dokumente und Skizzen*; Munich: C.H. Beck, 1982, pp. 82–83.

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