Chapter 2
A Post–Bureaucratic Age?
Caricatures, Claims, and Counter–Evidence

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ABSTRACT

This chapter rejects the claim that the replacement of bureaucracy by post-bureaucratic has become inevitable. It interrogates the claim in a number of ways: by unpacking the notion that each age has a unitary mode organizing and instead argues that there is pluralism; by illustrating that past organization was not purely bureaucratic; by arguing that explosive growth of information communications technologies has not only enabled post-bureaucratisation but also bureaucratic intensification; by separating out a number of elided terms such as 'modernization' and post-bureaucratisation; by demonstrating the confirmation bias employed by some leading post-bureaucratic age aficionados; and by providing evidence from diverse social arena and territories of bureaucratic intensification. It concludes that whilst there may be a positive role for the notion of post-bureaucracy as an ideal which may aid in illuminating and constraining excesses of bureaucracy, the wholesale replacement of bureaucracy by non-bureaucracy is unrealized and unrealizable.

I was cherry picking; I was cherry picking dreams (Girlpool)

INTRODUCTION

Few, if any, readers will not have experienced – as employees, customers, clients, students, citizens, and/or patients – frustrations, barriers, errors, diversions, indifference, deafness, delays, remoteness, inefficiencies, powerlessness, and irritation from what is commonly called 'bureaucracy'. Unlike the notion of 'organizational culture' which is conceived both as potentially malevolent (the toxic cause of one or other organizational dysfunctions) but also as potentially benevolent (changed culture as a remedial 'magic

dust')– most characterizations of 'bureaucracy' are unambiguously bleak. Although, many examples of errors, omissions and injustices created, it is said, by one or other features of bureaucracy (techniques, rules, values, or whatever) are widely published, the absence of 'bureaucracy' is rarely, if ever, blamed nor is more 'bureaucracy' advanced as a solution.[1] Bureaucracy, it is said, disables, it does not enable. A description of an organization as 'bureaucratic' is unequivocally critical. Labelling an individual as 'a bureaucrat' is insulting. In short, 'bureaucracy' is a "term of scorn" (Downs, 1965, p. 439).

Bureaucracy is criticised not only as oppressive and dysfunctional but *also* as obsolescent - its time is said to be over. A recurrent theme is that bureaucratic organizing is 'not fit for purpose' - "ill-suited to the novel problems we face in the twenty-first century" (Fung & Wright, 2003, p. 3), that it is an "organizational dinosaur helplessly involved in its death struggle" (cf. Olson, 2005, p. 1).The UK's former Prime Minister Tony Blair said its civil service was hopelessly bureaucratic adding: "Time has passed them by" (in Wintour,2013). Thus, many calls for replacement are not merely that this ought to occur, but that it is occurring (Child & McGrath, 2001; Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994; Kanter, 1989).

A variety of labels have been given to images and descriptions of alternative ways of organizing including:

- "The virtual corporation";
- "The learning organization";
- "The cellular form";
- The "boundaryless corporation";
- "The new work organization"; and
- The "spaghetti organization".

Castells (1996, p.164), for example, speaks of the "horizontal corporation" which is "a network of self-programmed, self-directed units based on decentralization". However, indicating a belief in the inevitable replacement of bureaucracy, the prefix 'post' –in the sense of both succeeding and negating – is often included in naming the alternative(s). These post-labels include:

- "Post-hierarchical"; and
- "Post-Modern" organization.

Over time, however, the label 'post-bureaucratic' has come to dominate the replacement discourse (e.g., Barley & Kunda, 2001; Budd, 2007; Castlenovo et al., 2016; Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994; Johnsen, 2016; Johnson et al., 2009; Kim &Han, 2015; Lippens, 2001; McHughet al., 2001; McKenna et al., 2010; Muthusamy, 2015; Talbot, 2016). Are organizations discarding bureaucracy? Are we now living in an age[2] in which organizing is inevitably becoming post-bureaucratic? Is bureaucracy withering away?

BACKGROUND

A New Age?

Descriptions or predictions of change from bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy is conceived as widespread, or alternatively, as piecemeal. The latter type of depiction largely refers to replacement (current or future)

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