

Chapter 113

Does Bureaucracy Stifle Moral Agency?

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ABSTRACT

Bureaucracy has been around us since the earliest human societies and has been the cornerstone of ancient and modern civilisations. Literature documents its several merits and demerits but little attention has been given to its moral ramifications. This is essential in these critical times that have recorded increasing numbers of corporate scandals globally. If bureaucracy is at the foundations of our modern societies, its role in this trend cannot be ignored hence the purpose of this paper. First, a historical review of bureaucracies from the industrial revolution era through the first and second world wars to our modern capitalist society is presented. Second, bureaucracy is conceptualised with a clear focus on Weber's ideal type. Arguments surrounding its rationality and efficiency were critically looked into as a basis for discussing emerging moral issues. It concludes by submitting that indeed bureaucracy can stifle moral agency.

INTRODUCTION

History documents the adoption of bureaucracy by the earliest empires as an administrative and power tool in the form of institutions, for organising resources towards achieving pre-determined ends, often the development of infrastructure and inventions (Farazmand, 2009). Beyond these empires, into modern times, bureaucracy continues to thrive in almost every sphere of life (Gajduschek, 2003). Its dominance as the rational way of efficiently organising resources as well as its many perceived contributions to our societies is keenly debated in many circles. Arguments range along the continuum of those in praise of its many abilities, especially its administrative capacities (Hunter, 1994; du Gay, 2000; Thompson and Alvesson, 2005; Reed, 2005) to those who claim it is undemocratic, unresponsive to people and normalises corruption and amorality in our economic life (Hummell, 2007, Jackall, 1983, Drucker, 1988), to the extent that its demise is often predicted in favour of newer organisation forms able to meet the needs of

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our changing world (Dopson and Stewart, 1990). But, bureaucracy has long been seen as a cornerstone of advanced industrial society that typifies the twentieth and twenty-first centuries (Clegg, Harris, Hopfl, 2011). Campbell, (2013) opined that large bureaucratic organizations have become a key fact of life in modern polities. And as Farazmand, (2001) & Gajduschek, (2003) further argue, bureaucracy has never had a true alternative; therefore, no organisation will ever totally replace it. Its survival through the ages, they claim, is an indication of its resilience and relevance (Farazmand, 2007).

This has driven the corresponding ‘expansion of bureaucracy into scopes or domains hard to define’ (Farazmand, 2004) such that these large organisations continue to grow and dominate more spheres of life (Eme and Emeh, 2012). With this also comes many ramifications, and of particular interest in this paper are the likely moral complications arising from constant interactions with bureaucratic systems and values. Various academics have both theoretically (Merton, 1949; Gronow, 1988; Hummel, 2007) and empirically (Jackall, 1983), advanced from earlier studies that bureaucratic organisations promote unethical business practices by limiting the moral agency/capacity of individuals working in them. And with the continual rise in the numbers of top profile corporate scandals, the possible moral consequences of bureaucracy in business organisations merits further investigations, hence the quest of this paper to investigate whether bureaucracy stifles moral agency.

HISTORY OF BUREAUCRACY: APPLIED 20TH CENTURY EVOLUTION OF BUREAUCRACY IN BUSINESS

Bureaucracy is one of the oldest institutions of government and administration in history (Farmanz, 2009). Long before Weber’s conceptualisation of bureaucracy, bureaucracy has been recorded throughout human history since early civilisations as an institution of government and administration. Great empires, including the Chinese, Babylonian, Persian and Roman empires, adopted bureaucracy in their administration to which crucial developments and advancements in human history have been credited (Fyre, 1975). Particularly, the Persian bureaucracy celebrated for its complexity, structure and effective performance became the model bureaucracy to follow (Cook, 1983). Under Cyrus the great, the Persian bureaucracy was credited to have encouraged free education, freedom from slavery, tolerant government and freedom of religions and associations (Farazmand, 2009). In addition to the several inventions, innovations and landmark developments, the Persian bureaucracy was also credited to have fed the world with ideas of administrative ethics, modern governance, organisation theory, and management amongst others (Farazmand, 2004). To these ends, bureaucracy was used as a public administrative tool, driven by authoritarian leadership, to create working systems for societies. Beyond this era, bureaucracy continued to exist in government and also in business organisations, towards different ends, for instance, profit generation, economic development, amongst others and in a different system. As Campbell, (2013) argued, throughout history, the changing political and economic landscape also changed the very nature of bureaucratic actions. Therefore, under capitalism for example, its adoption in private for-profit businesses operating in free markets produces totally different ramifications from shared value-based societal development objectives. Thus, the evolution, existence and consequences of bureaucracy in business organisations are explored from the industrial era through to post world war era to uncovering the grounds for its likely roles in the moral relapse observed by Jackall, (1988) and Hummel, (2007).

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