

# THE WAY OF BUREAUCRACY: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF CLASSIC COMPARATIVE BUREAUCRACY LITERATURE

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## **Introduction**

Large bureaucratic organizations have become a key fact of life in modern polities. As bureaucracy has become an important concern in national politics, it has grown as a focus of comparative political analysis. Previous studies dealt with basics of bureaucratic organization in developed and developing countries, beginning with the theoretical insights of Max Weber, Robert Michels, and other early social theorists in the early twentieth century. Weber set the standard for viewing bureaucracy in terms of rational decision-making, hierarchical organization, and standard operating procedures. Over the past half century, a large body of writings has attempted to construct basic theories of bureaucracy. As a result, there is now an improved understanding of bureaucracy as a significant component of both politics practiced in the advanced industrial countries (AICs), especially Western European countries, and the process of political and economic development elsewhere. This paper looks at four critical classic works in the comparative analysis of bureaucracy in terms of their key contributions to early postwar political theory.

This article examines main ideas of this important classic comparative bureaucracy analysis literature. The authors' arguments parallel one another and together suggest the main elements of mainstream thinking about bureaucratic organization in the late twentieth century. Downs sets forth a series of "non-obvious" hypotheses that provide heuristic tools for study of bureaucratic organizations. Auerbach, et al. considers the "generic behavior patterns" of bureaucrats across Western countries. Crozier focuses on the nature of bureaucratic organizations in France, and examines the general applicability of French experience to other countries. Harrison assesses the usefulness of a corporatist model, whereby a state sets up exclusive organizations to represent certain

segments of society, such as business, labor, or farmers; this aids understanding how bureaucratic units of the twentieth century reacted to emerging social problems. The article also suggests that the changing nature of political and economic challenges in Western countries is altering the very nature of bureaucratic action and politics.

### Emerging Laws of Bureaucracy

Downs's *Inside Bureaucracy* is a distinctly down to earth bureaucracy studies.<sup>1</sup> Focusing mainly on bureaucracy in America, it sets forth a number of "non-obvious" hypotheses about various aspects of the functions of bureaucratic organizations that can be tested by subsequent research. He begins with three "central hypotheses" and derives several "laws" from them. These hypotheses are: 1) "Bureaucratic officials (and all other social agents) seek to attain their goals rationally"; 2) "Every official is significantly motivated by his own self-interest even when acting in a purely official capacity"; and 3) "Every organization's social functions strongly influence its internal structure, and vice versa." Downs's "laws" follow directly from the above hypotheses, respectively: 1) the "Law of Increasing Conservatism," i.e., organizations tend to become more conservative as they get older; 2) the "Law of Hierarchy," or coordination of large-scale activities in the absence of markets necessitates a hierarchical structure; and 3) the "Law of Diminishing Control" and the "Law of Decreasing Coordination," i.e., as organizations become larger, control weakens and coordination becomes poorer.

Moreover, Downs adds, there is a "life cycle" to bureaucratic organizations, and this may be his most important contribution to comparative study. Such cycles begin four ways. First is what Weber calls the "routinization of charisma," where an organization is set up to carry on the activities or goals of a particular individual. Second is by the action of social groups, such as the agencies created during the New Deal. Third is by splitting off from an existing bureau, and fourth is through the "entrepreneurship of a few zealots." The growth of bureaus depends on the "exogenous" political environment. All bureaus, he says, are at first dominated by either advocates or zealots, and this determines the political climate found within the organization. Fast-growing bureaus lose their zealotness, gain a higher percentage of careerist "climbers" among their ranks, while the level of talent initially rises, and then gradually declines. As organizations grow older, they increase their efficiency through learning and develop formal-

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1 Michel Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1967).

ized rules, while officials shift from carrying out the organization's functions to insuring the survival of the organization. This hastens the onset of conservatism within the organization.

Related to this tendency toward conservatism is "the rigidity cycle." The greater the hierarchical distance between low-level officials and officials who give final approval for an action, the more difficult it is for officials to carry out their functions. As bureaus expand, the points of key decisions rise to higher levels. This "rigidity cycle" is most likely in totalitarian countries, or in bureaucratic institutions that serve democratic societies indirectly, but is an aspect of all bureaucratic organizations.

Downs lays out a Weberian list of characteristics common to all bureaus or agencies, viz., hierarchical structure, hierarchical communications, extensive formal rules, informal structures of authority and informal communications, and intensive personal loyalty and involvement among officials. He then lists the "limitations and biases common to all officials," such as the tendency to distort information as it flows up the chain of command, to be biased in favor of policies or actions that advance one's own self-interest, and to vary in the degree one carries out directives, depending on whether they help or hinder one's interests. Downs delineates several different categories of civil servants, such as "climbers," "specialists," and "conservers," i.e., people biased against any changes in the status quo.

Most bureaucratic communications, Downs states, are "subformal," in that the organization's "straining for completeness in the overall communications system" forces those working in the organization to fill in the gaps. Intra-agency communications are greater where there is more interdependence, uncertainty, and time pressure. The most effective communications are among well-established, slower-growing organizations.<sup>2</sup>

Downs's hypotheses are fruitful and describe important elements of bureaucratic behavior. Particularly useful may be his idea of an organizational life cycle. This is something that could possibly be verified in time sequence or case studies. However, there are two problems. The first is that, though he aspires to "non-obvious" propositions, Downs's hypotheses are not all that unusual or groundbreaking. Most of his conclusions are well within the conventional Weberian framework, i.e., rationality, organized management, hierarchy, and clear roles. He merely suggests that bureaucracies may not be as rational as Weber thought. Secondly, his central hypotheses and attendant "laws" seem closer to the conclusions of popular works on the ways that large organizations promote

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2 Anthony Downs, *Inside Bureaucracy* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1967), 3-30.

incompetence or trample ordinary people, such as *The Peter Principle* or *Up the Organization*. The book is more a collection of impressionistic hypotheses than systematic analysis. Downs's ideas are ever fascinating, but they cry out for more empirical analysis.

Aberbach, et al. take up the research challenge posed by the likes of Downs. Their study, *Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies*<sup>3</sup>, aims to discover the "generic behavior patterns" of both politicians and bureaucrats in the policy process. Based on semi-structured interviews with 1,400 high-level lawmakers and officials during the early 1970s in seven countries (Britain, West Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden, France, and the US), the study shies away from culturally specific discussion like that found in Crozier (discussed below). Where Crozier's study is far too France-centered to have universal application, Aberbach, et al. miss much of the cultural context of the countries they study. They also are not very clear about the questions asked respondents or sampling methods used.

The authors set out four different images, actually more like ideal types of the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats. Image I is closest to the classical Weberian ideal of complete separation: politicians make decisions; bureaucrats implement them. Image II suggests both politicians and civil servants have roles in decision-making, but that their contributions are distinct. According to Image III, both groups are equally involved in both politics and decision-making. The only difference is that politicians advance the broad, diffuse interests of the electorate, while bureaucrats focus on narrower interests of more organized groups. Finally, Image IV is a hybrid, in which the Weberian distinctions totally disappear. In France or Japan, for example, bright bureaucrats occasionally exchange a successful administrative career for political office.

The book's conclusions are hardly startling, but always well presented. First, bureaucratic elites "come from the tiny minority of the population that is male, urban, university educated, upper middle class in origin, and public affairs oriented"<sup>4</sup>, while parliamentary elites come from the male college graduates of "public affairs oriented families." Second, the authors suggest that both politicians and administrators engage in political "games," but the nature of these games is different for each: the bureaucrat uses skills of mediation and bargaining in "juggling" different interest groups, while the politician is more a generalist. As a consequence, politicians are in touch with "broader social

3 Joel D Aberbach, *Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

4 *Ibid.*, 81.

forces,” while bureaucrats are “enmeshed” in the concerns of narrow interest groups. Third, they note the ideological contrast of left-leaning European politicians and more conservative civil servants, which partly reflects the differing historical development of their respective institutions.

More remarkable is the book’s reworking and blending of both Weberian and elite theory. Noting Weber’s valedictory diagnosis of the emerging state as run by “two uncertain partners, the elected party politician and the professional state bureaucrat,” they suggest that these two roles are becoming blurred. Bureaucrats are taking on the role of intermediary between interest groups and the state, a function traditionally assigned exclusively to politicians. Overall, the work is a well-crafted study of contrasting elites, but it never reaches the level of grand theory. It merely affirms common sense that bureaucrats and politicians are different by both background and interest, but they still play in the same game.<sup>5</sup>

More focused than these broadly theoretical works is Crozier’s *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*.<sup>6</sup> Like Downs, Crozier devotes much of his book to an exposition of general patterns within bureaucracies, but approaches his subject through two unnamed cases drawn from the French bureaucracy a Parisian clerical agency and a state-owned manufacturing enterprise. Also like Downs, he hopes to generate general hypotheses about the operations of organizations but within the broad notion of “cultural systems.” Crozier begins by distinguishing three definitions of bureaucracy 1) Weber’s in terms of rationality; 2) “government by bureaus,” or “departments of the state staffed by appointed and not elected functionaries, organized hierarchically, and dependent on a sovereign authority”<sup>7</sup>; and 3) the common pejorative evocation of slowness, routine, and “complication of procedures.”

It is in terms of the latter definition that Crozier chooses to examine bureaucracy. First, he sees power relationships, or the means of social control operating in a closed “cultural system” of organization, as the central problem of bureaucracy. Organizations are collections of mutually dependent subgroups (perhaps a close approach to interdependence), providing employees little chance for promotion or transfer. Second, he suggests that a “pathology of organizations” develops from the fundamental incompatibility of basically utilitarian organizational goals with means of social control derived from the cultural milieu from which organizations spring. Through rule making, bureau-

5 Joel D. Aberbach, et. al., *Bureaucrats and Politicians in Western Democracies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 3-24, 47-83.

6 Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

7 *Ibid.*, 3.

cracy tries to resolve conflicts that can develop where rules are unclear, but the resulting rigidity of rules (a point also made by Downs) becomes a new source of conflict and organizational dysfunction. The bureaucracy attempts to get around its rigidity through centralization of functions, but this only distances top management from workers. Supervisors can get by merely observing the rules, but top management faces criticism all around. This only adds fuel to the conflict, and makes workers feel no one cares about them except people at their own level. Third, unlike mainstream theorists, but he sees conflict as an insurer of stability, since it can bind workers together and force management to deal more directly with lower levels.

Crozier's is an interesting approach, especially in its focus on power and rule-making as a source of conflict, and stands as an alternative to Weberian analysis. However, Crozier's ideas are severely limited to the specific 1960s French context. While it may be useful to examine bureaucratic organizations as collections of mutually dependent groups engaged in an ongoing power struggle, it is not true that all organizations constrain opportunities for advancement. Many bureaucracies, especially American and Japanese, use different forms of systemized promotion as a strong motivator. Rule-making may indeed promote conflict, just as much as it resolves it, but new rules do not always result in the progressive alienation of workers or staff from management. In the Japanese case, top-level management continually relies on lower levels to generate ideas, analysis, and inputs. There are undoubtedly cases where conflict can be a source of stability, but it is more often a hindrance to the organization's work. In American departments and agencies, for example, attempts to discipline or fire employees can lead to months or years of internal hearings and court cases.

Crozier's fourth point is an attempt to relate French bureaucratic behavior to French national traits. Like Converse and other scholars of French bureaucratic behavior, he notes a tendency within French society toward conflict. The French, says Crozier of his fellow countrymen, have difficulty forming groups, eschew group identification of any kind, shy away from one-to-one interactions, and are quite defensive about their individual roles within the organization. Generally resourceful, they are alienated from their social settings. French also tend to relate to institutions in a very legalistic manner, and this heightens the tendency to rule making.

His is an intriguing approach but, like Crozier's general theoretical ideas on bureaucratic behavior, may have restricted usefulness. If the French have the traits he says they do, perhaps these traits alone account for the power-centered, rule-oriented nature of French bureaucracy. So, other bureaucracies could be expected to have entirely different internal patterns. If culture is as crucial an

explanatory variable as he says it is, then German, Italian, or British bureaucracy would not manifest the same kind of power relationships or rule making tendencies. One may also question the objectivity of conclusions about one's own culture, particularly when they are as one-sided as Crozier.

Crozier's conclusions also raise troubling questions about his design and methodology. First, in aspiring to grand bureaucratic theory while insisting the French political culture may be unique, Crozier sets up a crippling contradiction that limits the applicability of his work beyond French borders. Crozier seems unable to decide what kind of study this is. To arrive at grand theory, he needs cross-national data, and to engage in comparative analysis, he needs information on bureaucratic cultural contexts in other countries. Second, it is not really appropriate to generalize about an entire nation based on a study of two organizations. Third, his generalized impressions of cultural behavior do not necessarily provide a true picture of a people's character. This sounds suspiciously like the unsystematic studies of "national character" that preceded Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's *The Civic Culture*.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Crozier hopes his study can lead to better "choice of structures" within such organizations. He suggests specific changes in the clerical agency designed to overcome the problems of worker alienation and distancing of management. For example, he sees the clerical agency as a fairly simple organization that can be improved through better channels of communication from top management to supervisors, and to workers. Adding this normative dimension does not strengthen the work. It is the accepted wisdom of much of social science that analytical and normative studies are different species, and frequently do not coexist well between the covers of the same study. In Crozier's study, the analytical so far overshadows the normative that one wonders why the latter was included at all.<sup>9</sup>

In *Pluralism and Corporatism: The Political Evolution of Modern Democracies*<sup>10</sup>, Harrison deals more generally with the way political organizations relate to society, using the concept of corporatism as applied to modern states. He begins by noting the changing role of the state politics in the AICs. The functioning of a nation's politics, he says, boils down to four essential questions: "What is the political culture? What is the pattern of conflict and of interest definition

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8 Gabriel A Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: political attitudes and democracy in five nations*, (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1963).

9 Michel Crozier, *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 31-60, 112-174.

10 Reginald J Harrison, *Pluralism and Corporatism: The Political Evolution of Modern Democracies*, (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1980).

and expression? What is the pattern of controls? What is the relevance of the external environment?" Political science has focused on the second, conflicts and interests, but the third, controls, is equally important. To resolve any conflict over goals, an advanced society blends mechanisms for control and consensus formation. He suggests a crude dichotomy of consensual and controlled societies. The former relies on incremental decision making in an environment of declining ideology, while the latter employs a "coherent set of policy goals" or long-term planning. It is a consensual society from which corporatism emerges.

Corporatism states of the twentieth century set up exclusive organizations to represent various segments of society, e.g., business, labor, farmers, and women. The corporatist model, a reaction to the prevailing pluralist interpretation of democracy, posits an arrangement whereby government grants official recognition to such private organizations to serve as the sole representatives of sectors of the economy, in a "collaborative but functionally segmented process of policy formation." Harrison believes that corporatism is not only becoming increasingly important to the work of modern democratic states, but is altering the nature of representative democracy. The ascendance of corporatism, he says, goes back to the early postwar prosperity of the 1950s, when high growth provided both the finances and the consensus to undertake a variety of new social commitments. Government bureaucracies were left to work out the details, and required the cooperation of various interest groups to implement these social programs. Bureaucrats found corporatism an attractive answer, as did the interests granted a high degree of participation in policy decision-making.

Harrison suggests planning, not bureaucracy itself, is the hallmark of the corporatist society. Building on Galbraith's notion of "the New Industrial State," a two-tiered system of large corporations operating through planning and a market system for small and medium-sized enterprises, he suggests that each of the major AIC's have a well-developed planning sector which operates alongside a market system. In Britain, government-directed enterprises are a large presence in the economy, though government management is a relatively small component of the overall economy. The French government, by contrast, uses contracts, tax incentives, and financial concessions to shape economic decisions. The postwar reconstruction of West Germany and Japan gave their planning agencies a mandate to foster free economies, while protecting them from economic crisis and ineffective business practices.<sup>11</sup>

Harrison agrees with Aberbach, et al. that the central issue for bureaucracies

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11 Reginald J. Harrison, *Pluralism and Capitalism: the political evolution of modern democracies* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980), 13, 188.



is the degree to which they should be involved in political decision making. Clearly, postwar bureaucracy has acquired political responsibilities that place it far beyond the Weberian model of professional neutrality. As a corporatist agent, bureaucracy gets involved in the writing of legislation, serves as the focus of interest group activity, and must frequently respond to demands of politicians, such as ministers and permanent secretaries in the UK.

Harrison's study is a valuable addition to corporatist theory. He rightly notes the limitations of corporatism; specifically that it is an ideal type. This is an important caveat because ideal types, as mentioned above, only have value to the degree that they get theoretical discussion started. Harrison's analysis is adequate as far as it goes, but is lacking in several respects. His discussion of both the development and future direction of corporatism is thin, and he neglects much of the critical literature of corporatism. For example, though he mentions Philippe Schmitter, he does not take up his and others' discussion of the limitations of corporatism in both Europe and Latin America. Corporatism is perhaps a useful concept, but it is both difficult to measure and has never appeared in a fully functioning form. Even fascist Italy and the bureaucratic-authoritarian regimes of Latin America used corporatist structures selectively. Given that high tech and service industries are replacing heavy industry throughout the developed world, labeling the current AIC's corporatist stretches the concept to its limits. Galbraith's *The New Industrial State*, with its fusion of capitalism and socialism, gained few adherents in the 1960s, and Harrison's sketchy portrait of corporatism is not likely to replace pluralism as the prevailing paradigm.

## **Conclusion**

There are four main types of bureaucratic literature: historical development of bureaucracies, broad theoretical examination of bureaucracy, national studies of bureaucratic organizations, and applications of political theories derived from other areas, e.g., corporatism and rational choice. As the AICs shift from industrialization to high tech and service industries, the role of planning and economic bureaucracy has shifted from guiding hand to facilitator. As populations grow older, the need for social services geared to older populations increases. Bureaucracies of the future then must confront issues generated by globalization and economic integration, while dealing with a more technologically connected world and matters that transcend national boundaries, i.e., "intermestic" problems at the intersection of national and international policy. Since the focus of bureaucracy is radically changing, it is all the more important that scholars arrive at better understandings of how bureaucracy really works. **Y**