

BUREAUCRACY AND SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

Comparative Perspectives

Edited by Haldor Byrkjeflot
and Fredrik Engelstad

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BUREAUCRACY AND SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

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**BUREAUCRACY AND
SOCIETY IN TRANSITION:
COMPARATIVE
PERSPECTIVES**

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INTRODUCTION: BUREAUCRACY IN TRANSITION

Haldor Byrkjeflot and Fredrik Engelstad

Among the many terms of abuse presently in circulation, ‘bureaucracy’ certainly holds a prominent place. Bureaucracies are often scolded as formalistic, hampering innovation, detracting attention from important topics and living their own life as self-sufficient bodies. Bureaucracy automatically breeds more bureaucracy, and thereby creates its own justification. Thereby, bureaucracies are expansive and expensive; they control vast amounts social resources, not because their services are in demand, but due to a vicious internal logic. Inevitably, corruption lies close at hand. In this discourse universe, Max Weber as the father of ‘bureaucratic theory’ is long dead; if he is exposed, it is mostly an example of social science mummification.

However, this is not necessarily the last word to be said about bureaucracy and Max Weber (Byrkjeflot, this volume). The critical views on the ‘bureaucratic phenomenon’ (Crozier, 1964) are not unfounded, and they rest to a large extent on more or less systematic observations. But they tend to disregard the inevitability of bureaucracies for running complex organisations in modern societies, while at the same time to overlook their variability (Perrow, 1986). Despite many similarities, bureaucracies look quite different in the public, private and voluntary sector. The same is true for bureaucracies in modern societies, in contrast to developing countries. To concentrate the attention on one field in this vast landscape, the studies of bureaucracies in transition in the present volume are limited to the public sector in modern societies, that is various types of civil service. In this, three crucial aspects of modern public bureaucracies are focused: the relationship between politics and bureaucracy, organisational challenges and problems and the significance of identity and public ethos in modern bureaucratic institutions.

FEAR OF FORMALITY

Underneath much of the scepticism to bureaucracy based in actual experience of organisational shortcomings, lies much ideologically based resistance to formality and the analysis of organisations when they are experienced from an insider point of view (du Gay & Vikkelso, 2017). An early criticism is that the formalisms of bureaucracy are inhuman and produce rigid personality types. And serious unintended consequences in forms of goal displacements make bureaucracies an end in themselves (Merton, 1940). More recent versions spring out of a general mistrust to the administrative state and large-scale organisations (Byrkjeflot & du Gay, 2012). A liberal critique of contemporary society assumes that markets are more productive as coordinating mechanisms, and *a fortiori* that organisations should be regarded as contract relations, and thereby as a type of markets (Jensen & Meckling, 1976). At the other end of the spectrum, populist scepticism has expanded in the recent decade (Mudde, 2004; Müller, 2016), nourishing expectations that a strong leader will be able to cut through what is perceived as bureaucratic mess. Countries as different as Poland and Hungary at one side and the United States at the other, see strong attacks on what has been termed the administrative state by its supporters, or the ‘deep state’ by its enemies.

A widespread scepticism of a somewhat different type stems from the idea that bureaucracy is not what it used to be; neither when it comes to its tasks and targets, nor its size and mode of operation. Aspects of the society associated with the term bureaucracies are still expanding in modern societies, even if it may be masked by various strategies. This is not least due to changes in society and in the economy. Growing complexities of social structures, characterising modernisation processes, imply new forms of social rights and new types of legal protection. Combined with the growing significance of the service sector and of intangible objects of property rights in modern economies, new forms of regulation emerge. Another part of this picture is the transition from the regulative state to the welfare state in most or all modern societies, which also has growth in bureaucracies as a consequence. Thus, if public bureaucracies traditionally could remain modest in size by having their point of gravity in normative governance, contemporary civil service stands forth as more of a hybrid, embracing normative and instrumental approaches in complex combinations (Byrkjeflot & Jespersen, 2014).

An additional source of hybridisation is that public bureaucracies to a growing extent recruit their employees from the same labour markets as the private sector (Gottschall et al., 2015). Contagion from the private sector in terms of working modes, wage formation and career paths becomes inevitable. Hence, Max Weber’s notion of the life-long loyalty of the civil servant to his or her employment and work organisation is no longer viable. In combination with the growth of welfare state bureaucracies, with stronger instrumental orientation, this also means that the work forms of public bureaucracies are affected, with ensuing pressures towards ‘post-bureaucracy’ (Alvesson & Thompson, 2004; Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994) or ‘neo-liberal bureaucracy’ (Hibou,

2015), based on work groups and more individual initiatives among employees, and less inflexible lines of report. The ideology of post-bureaucracy seems to be a strong motivating factor pushing for team-work, shorter inter-organisational careers and a higher degree of mobility across value spheres and organisations (Hibou, 2015).

IF IT'S DEAD, WHY WON'T IT LIE DOWN?

Even though the fear of formality has been breeding, the idea of the death of bureaucracy is greatly exaggerated. If bureaucracy is dead, why does it refuse to lie down? Most studies that put the perceived shift from bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy to the test find that modern organisations are more, rather than less, bureaucratic, and they also refer to the continued existence of hierarchy, control and formal rules (Alvesson & Thompson, 2004; Willmott, 2011). However, this is not to deny clear changes in the ways various bureaucratic aspects are combined. At the same time, core values such as political accountability, *Rechtsstaat* ideals, and equality before the law, all of them absolute pre-conditions for a democratic society, are unrealisable without well-developed bureaucracies (Fukuyama, 2014).

This does not mean that bureaucracies can avoid wide-ranging reforms to be able to serve societies in continuous transformation. Some of these reform pressures seem to be of an almost global character, with digitalisation, managerialisation and flexibilisation as major forces for change; others have a more local character.

VARIETIES OF BUREAUCRACY AND REFORM MODELS

The elements of bureaucracy (legal structures, public service ethos and organisational structures) are differently institutionalised in different kinds of societies. It has become a standard argument that 'varieties of capitalism' are important, but so are 'varieties of bureaucracy' (Byrkjeflot, this volume). Varieties in bureaucratic structures are of critical importance for the way societies deal with challenges related to global migration, climate change and security risks, economic development or the global spread of organisational models, for instance. There may indeed be lessons to be learnt from further exploring variations in administrative traditions as has been done in recent scholarly work (see e.g. Van den Berg & Toonen, 2015).

Different nation-states face similar challenges, but reform paths are different (Byrkjeflot, du Gay, & Greve, 2018; Gottschall et al., 2015). Leichter et al. (this volume) refer to administrative traditions as clusters of national public administrations that share substantial institutional and cultural characteristics. One way of differentiating such traditions is to distinguish between a Continental Napoleonic Model, a Continental Federal Model, an Anglo-Saxon Model, a Scandinavian Model and an East European Model (Kuhlmann & Wollmann, 2014). While Greve, Læg Reid and Rykkja (this volume) discover distinct differences between the Northern and Southern countries in Europe, the

differences between families of nations are found to be less sharp in the contribution from Leichter et al. (this volume).

Like [Gottschall et al. \(2015\)](#), Leichter et al. depart from a Weberian conceptualisation of public servant identity and they see this identity in contrast to a New Public Management (NPM) service identity (see also [Meyer, Egger-Peitler, Höllerer, & Hammerschmid, 2014](#); [Meyer & Hammerschmid, 2006](#)). While Leichter et al. (this volume) do not find that administrative traditions and civil servant identities overlap to a large extent, others who have used a broader perspective and focused on fewer cases have found other kinds of variations. [Gottschall et al. \(2015\)](#) find that there has been a change from civil servants of the Weberian kind to bureaucrats with a public service identity. The United Kingdom and Sweden moved faster towards the ideal type of the service provider identity, whereas Germany and France have maintained more traits of the Weberian ideal civil servant. They are not alone in observing that public sector reforms and employment re-regulation differ. However, ‘irrespective of the scope and path of administrative reform’, they say, ‘we can observe the unravelling of public employment regimes not only across countries but also within countries’ ([Gottschall et al., 2015](#)). So, there is variation, but at least in Europe there has also been a general development away from the Weberian public employment state.

The administrative traditions and identities of public servants used in historical comparisons are ideal types; a certain degree of hybridisation or mix between models is to be expected, as several of the chapters in this volume have emphasised. In practice, it becomes difficult to distinguish between reform traditions and administrative traditions in some of this public administration literature. A telling example is the overview of the literature on NPM in the Nordic countries by [Greve et al. \(this volume\)](#). They describe a reform trajectory that makes use of several different reform items and conclude that a hybrid model is the consequence of the high reform intensity during latter years. However, they also find diversity within the Nordic region, for instance a historical stronger emphasis on public agencies in Sweden than in the other countries.

There has been an intense focus on reforming the various Nordic models of public administration. While it is often claimed that the Nordic welfare states are ‘challenged but sustainable’, it is sometimes hard to grasp what aspects of the models are maintained and what is changing ([Andersson, 2009](#)). It has become so commonplace to argue for ‘changing the model in order to keep it’ that some worry that the Nordics now ‘only’ represent a reform model and that there is a withering away of some of the foundations associated with the Nordic model itself – social equality, inclusiveness, democracy and fairness. In such a situation, the Weberian aspects of public administration may be seen as a safeguard for upholding the values of a liberal, democratic welfare state. [Pollitt and Bouckaert \(2011\)](#) point to the neo-Weberian state as a reform model alongside NPM and New Public Governance, but the idea of using such a label to characterise a reform model without linking it more clearly to a pre-existing Weberian model for administration has also been criticised ([Byrkjeflot et al., 2018](#)).

CIVIL SERVICE AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

In the relationship between political leadership and their staff of bureaucrats, their different roles and competencies, never ending questions are raised. Is bureaucracy simply an extension of the arms of politicians, as is often assumed, or should they be considered as representing an autonomous profession? In case of the latter, how is 'autonomy' to be understood? Many of the contributions to the NPM literature have taken the former position (Lane, 2005; Le Grand, 2006). Their point of departure has been the necessity of sharpening political control, in order to counteract tendencies of bureaucratic self-sufficiency and goal displacement. Others have pointed to the unfortunate consequences of outsourcing and bureaucrats being shuffled around by politicians, thereby depriving them of professional autonomy (Pollitt, 2011). In this respect, India is a striking example (Sahu, 2004); broad comparative studies point in the same direction (Dahlström & Lapuente, 2017, see Byrkjeflot, this volume). du Gay (2000) represents a middle position; with reference to Max Weber, he has spelled out the close relationship between politicians and bureaucrats in all aspects of policy implementation. Crudely, one might say, bureaucrats should not be regarded as servants, but as professional coworkers whose competence exceeds that of their ministers, even though the minister retains the last word in the case of conflict.

At the same time, the question is inevitably raised, who controls the controllers? Given that the authority of bureaucracies has been resting on the power of the state, this question has to a great extent been overlooked. The emergence of democratic culture on a broader basis has been one crucial element driving in the opposite direction. Thereby, independent public auditing is one type of control measure, which has grown in importance (Reichborn-Kjennerud et al., this volume). These auditing agencies are necessarily appointed by political bodies. But in order to function, it is important to retain an arm's length distance to politics, which in many cases has proved to be a difficult balance.

BUREAUCRATIC IDENTITIES

When regarded at close distance, many aspects of the relationships between politicians and bureaucrats take on a different figure. One is the problematic definition of bureaucratic neutrality; what, after all, is the relevant form of neutrality on behalf of civil service? Bureaucrats cannot be apolitical; they are political in the sense that they share responsibility for the political aims of the incumbent government. However, they operate within grey zones where the lines between political aims and professional competence are difficult to draw (Hustedt & Salomonsen, this volume).

These and related ambiguities spill over to the professional self-image of bureaucrats, their identification and ambitions. On the one hand, they describe themselves as linked to powerful positions, and on the other hand, their descriptions of their actual job performance are filled with rather trivial chores (Mangset, this volume). Such tensions are easily visible in national politics, where the dominant currency is power. It takes on a different character in local

politics, where the main currency is welfare, and production of welfare is an essential part of the activity. In these cases, unanticipated coalitions in the fields of local politics and street-level bureaucracy may emerge, challenging the power of local politicians, to the advantage of the ambitions of primary care givers and their clients (Vike, this volume).

ORGANISATION: HOW DO RECENT REFORMS AFFECT BUREAUCRATIC INFRASTRUCTURES?

To avoid overburdening and preserve the efficiency in the political apparatus, it has turned out to be necessary in many societies to decouple ministries from more clean-cut, specialised agencies. Given the growth of public agencies, this seems unavoidable; however, it comes at the cost of considerable tensions between ministries and their quasi-autonomous agencies (du Gay, 2007; Elston, 2014). A related change impelled by many of the same factors, stems from altered relationships between public bureaucracies and private suppliers and service agencies. Growth in the public sector accompanied by growth in organisational complexity, makes it unrealistic and in part even irrational for public bureaucracies to take charge of the chain of delivery of services as a whole. Even though some sorts of ‘private-public cooperation’ or partnerships have seemed rational, they also raise serious problems of governance (Hodge & Greve, 2017). In the United Kingdom, where they have been pushed very far, such partnerships have become increasingly contested (Jones, 2017).

The main problem with these types of decentralisation does not necessarily lie in the diversification of services, but rather in the ideology taking the private sector as a blueprint for the public sector. Without an eye for the many specificities of the public policies of the welfare state, new wicked problems emerge. A challenge is to leave sufficient room for discretion in public bureaucracies to take charge of traditional norm orientation and emphasis on formality, while at the same time keeping an eye on the increasing importance of goal orientation and goal formation. The growing prevalence of economists as a profession in the civil service (Christensen, this volume) is but one expression of this change towards instrumental orientations and the difficulties of balancing substantive goals with economic priorities. These changes may also directly affect evaluation criteria for civil service operations. Boll (this volume) discusses alternative types of success criteria adapted to necessary uncertainties in the evaluation of bureaucratic operations.

It does not take much imagination to predict that wicked problems will continue to be prevalent and that the search for final solutions will continue to provide disappointing results. The best prospects for success, after all, may be that it is possible to maintain a ‘bureaucratic ethos’ embedded in an attentive and trusting environment, as Vike (this volume) describes in the case of Norway. That also means the bureaucratic identity oriented at handling the difficult balance between loyalty to the political leadership and to the substantive goals that the bureaucracies are supposed to serve (Leixnering et al., this volume).

TRANSITION: THE ROAD TO DENMARK

If there is a bureaucratic dream, it is one of a combination of fairness and effectiveness rather than corruption and goal displacement; stability and autonomy rather than patrimonialism and political servitude. Movements in the direction of fairness, effectiveness, stability and autonomy are what Fukuyama (2014) termed the ‘Road to Denmark’. Now, even Danish bureaucracy in its present state has its weaknesses, as amply demonstrated by Lopdrup-Hjort and Roelsgaard Obling (this volume). Even so, the Danish case is one of the most attractive examples of a large bureaucracy that is fairly efficient and uncorrupt. What can the road to this desirable state of affairs look like?

A challenge that modern societies have in common, is the ambiguous position in the development of the civil service in between state and civil society. This is demonstrated in several studies of the emergence of the civil service in Scandinavia. Paradoxically, the relative absence of corruptibility in the Danish case was to a large extent related to the dynamics between bureaucracy and a strong central power, already from the eighteenth century (Frisk-Jensen, this volume). For the parallel development in Sweden, Rothstein (2011; Rothstein & Teorell, 2015) has launched a model of a ‘big bang’ around the mid-nineteenth century, caused by the simultaneous professionalisation of the legal profession and the growing influence from civil society via the emerging mass media. However, here earlier sources are significant. Papakostas (this volume) broadens the picture by pointing to the assessment of property rights in Swedish agriculture from the seventeenth century on, which paved the way for a more comprehensible bureaucratic system to emerge. Some of these early traits of Scandinavian bureaucracies are still discernible today, as attested by Greve, et al. (this volume), who portray the hybridity of Scandinavian bureaucracies as a special combination of traditional orientation and elements of NPM.

TRANSITIONS: TO DENMARK OR BEYOND?

As a catchphrase, the ‘Road to Denmark’ points to a both desirable and possible mode of development. Desirable because the existing case seems to work fairly well, possible because the road has been taken at least once. At the same time, it is obvious that the Scandinavian case rests on a complex set of institutional and historical factors that cannot be repeated in other settings. But if other societies cannot develop along the same road, it is still possible to distil elements and processes of broader relevance.

Take first the inevitable topic of corruption, the most visible threat to the development of social welfare in the contemporary world. In the political discourse, the BRICS countries are often singled out as the most important new players on the world scene. Their common problem, however, is rampant corruption, that will hamper social and economic development for decades to come. How to get around the problem is still an open question: by a ‘big bang’ or by closer relationships with the state. At present, both ways seem more or less barred. A big bang may have worked in certain cases in the past; but how is

it possible to stage a big bang at will? On the other hand, long-term reform movements are very vulnerable to sudden political changes and disruptions, typical for democratic and not least semi-democratic societies. Alternative models are strongly in demand (Grindle, 2012). May be a partial solution – if one at all – will turn out to be some version of ‘muddling through’. Looking to Europe, the problems of corruption is not of the same dimensions as in many other parts of the world, but in many countries of the EU, it is still a challenge to be taken very seriously. In the long run, it is still conceivable – albeit far from certain – that pressures stemming from the special workings of the European Union may have some long-term effects.

For the immediate future of the European countries, main challenges to bureaucratic rationality may be summarised as problems of governance capacity and division of power. A democratic state must be strong without becoming autocratic. This is equally true for modern bureaucracy as a crucial element in democracy. Governance capacity presupposes that bureaucracies are effective and enter into a reform mode to achieve this. On the European scene, such requirements are met with considerable resistance; nevertheless, they are likely to have to adapt to the current challenges as well. They are obvious within the field of technological innovation, and they are equally present as economic pressures, due to increasing relative costs of public services. At the same time, bureaucratic identities constitute a significant element of governance capacity, as a source to avoid serious goal displacements and there is clearly a dilemma involved in the need for reform along with the need to conserve and develop motivation for public service.

Division of power implies that the broad variety of political and social institutions retain their specific mode of functioning. This is true, and particularly pertinent, for bureaucracy as well. On the one hand, bureaucracy must be autonomous, in the sense of representing professional and legal expertise. It must be able to ‘speak truth to power’. On the other hand, it must be subordinate to political decisions. Such difficult power balances are under threat in several countries in today’s Western world, partly due to expectations that political problems may be solved by circumvention of cumbersome formalities. The alternative is not to assume that forms of power balance and institutional differentiation are given once and for all, but that forms of power and control should be a constant theme for political and professional reflection and discussion.

FUTURE CHALLENGES – DIGITALISATION AND MEDIATISATION

The organisational challenges sketched above are reinforced by information and communication technology and the communication revolution of the public sphere. We may only have seen the first steps in these transitions. Even if they are not the thematised in the present volume, they call for at least a short reflection.

Digitalisation and e-government initiatives transform and standardise office work and create a new division of labour between clients, users, professionals

and managers. Digitalisation also has consequences for the bureaucratic practice of keeping files and the channels of official communication. Open government invites citizens to collaborate in the production of public services and, at the same time, it demands that the administration makes available to the public a wide range of data collected in the course of its activities. This may have its advantages from a democratic perspective, but it also blurs the distinction between official and private property and undermines the autonomy of the state administration. Moreover, the involvement of a broad spectrum of actors outside the formal hierarchy of the bureau challenges the administration's specified areas of jurisdiction and expertise. Thus, processes of digitalisation, designed as a means for efficiency, influence and change the organisation of state activities and thereby established bureaucratic norms and practices.

Media's transition from printed dailies to 24/7 multi-outlets, and from being reactive and respectful vis-à-vis elected politicians to proactive and anti-authoritarian journalism has affected political institutions. Increased media pressure also has weakened ministries' control of the timing of decision-making. Political decisions may need to be reached more quickly and be presented in a format that fits with journalistic criteria. Tasking bureaucrats with producing material for quick answers challenge established bureaucratic role conceptions (Schillemans, 2012). Continuous demands from the media and the need of politicians to be responsive to the media put the long-term, professional tasks of bureaucrats under pressure (Thorbjørnsrud, Figenschou, & Ihlen, 2014).

The title of this book refers to bureaucracy in transition and we have seen it as our task to outline several of the challenges facing bureaucracy today. Our question is not whether the era of bureaucracy is over or whether we have moved into a new era of post-bureaucracy or neo-liberal bureaucracy. Rather, along with Max Weber and a whole range of contemporary scholars of organisation theory and public administration, we choose to see bureaucracy as a set of values and institutions that has its 'ups and downs' and has been more or less influential in different parts of the world (Grindle, 2012; Olsen, 2008). Clearly there are many challenges to such institutions and they have to adapt to new circumstances. However, 'bureaucracy is not a tool for executing arbitrary commands; it is not assessed solely on the basis of its effectiveness and efficiency in achieving predetermined purposes' (Olsen, 2008, pp. 16–17). Bureaucracy is not just an instrument, but also an institution 'with a *raison d'être* of its own' (Olsen, 2008, p. 17). The bureaucracy is 'a changing mix of fairly enduring and legitimate organizational forms' (Olsen, 2008, p. 32) that has developed differently in different states and political contexts. This is an important insight to keep in mind given the current circumstances, where populists and autocratic rulers in many parts of the world challenge bureaucratic values and institutions.

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