**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 21: Max Weber on Bureaucracy**

* Weber’s work on bureaucracy was written 1908-1920.
* He felt the development of bureaucracy began in societies whose political organization tended toward officialdom (e.g. eastern empires; feudal estates of the 12-13th centuries). Basically, emperors and lords made decrees/pronouncements, appointing officials with local powers to see them performed.
* Weber identified 6 types of bureaucratic structure:

1. States which tend to control policy & policing functions;
2. Ecclesiastical communities required to administer large populations of unbelievers;
3. Economies whose main function is to distribute goods/coordinate functions;
4. The modern agency;
5. The military; and
6. The judiciary.

**Distinction Between Administratively Ordered &**

**Bureaucratic Societies:**

* Weber felt that bureaucracy was a modern historical development, so he distinguished it by comparing earlier, administratively ordered societies (e.g. Egypt and Rome, the Catholic Church, Asiatic societies, and feudal economies)
* Despite having administrative staff and trained decision makers, these were based on patrimonial rulers (e.g. lords). There were no restrictions placed on his prerogatives/ discretion, much was based on custom rather than legal rules, and much was rooted in personal loyalty to the lord.
* In contrast, modern bureaucracy develops under legal domination:

(1) Carried out under procedurally correct legal enactments where the legitimacy of rules rests on legal authority; and where

(2) Administrative tasks are quantitatively extended to such

an extent that a larger organization is required

* In these circumstances, bureaucracy expands as the administrative tasks of the state expand
* A second causal component is the emergence of the modern economy, the rise of civil politics, a rational political sphere, and the need for police regulation. Here, unlike the earlier patrimonial type administrations:

(1) The seat of administrative activity shifts from the household to the office, which is clearly set apart;

(2) Administrative authority/discretion is strictly bound by legal rules and each official’s jurisdiction is so defined;

(3) Heads of offices observe legal limitations on their authority/are bound by administratively rational rules circumscribing their sphere of social action;

(4) Relations between office heads and subordinates are governed by procedural rules regulating recruitment and interactions (e.g. decisions are impersonal/ technical);

(5) Rules are implemented under legal regulation, which govern conduct within the hierarchical, bureaucratic chain of command;

(6) All business/communication is conducted on the basis of written documentation and a system of file keeping/records.

**Factors Leading to Bureaucratization:**

* Weber thought several historical factors led to the development of such systems:

(1) Changes occurring in the conditions/organization of society (e.g. industrialization fostering more free time, planning, social innovation, and rational knowledge); and

(2) Changes occurring in the system of rationality and decision making (e.g. greater need for rational accounting methods in industry spilling over into social organization);

(3) The development and gradual imposition of a system of ‘calculable law’ and legislation (e.g. bringing about greater use of written records, accounting, file-keeping);

(4) Recognition of the usefulness/utility of technical rules/their administrative efficiency.

**Key Concepts in Weber’s Study of Bureaucracy:**

* How is bureaucracy a form of administrative rationality? A form of domination? Here, we must consider:
  1. Means and ends; and
  2. Formal and substantive rationality
* With regard to the former, Weber argued that in earlier periods achieving ends were largely governed by ethical, religious values. As time went on, both means and ends became subject to technical criteria.
* As for the latter, Weber saw bureaucracy as a triumph of formal over substantive rationality, of technical calculation of means and ends over decisions made on the basis of values.

**The Technical Superiority of Bureaucracy:**

* Weber suggests an analogy: bureaucracy compares to earlier forms of administration as machines do to craft production (i.e. an administration with greater speed, efficiency, and knowledge of cases leading to the rationalization of life)
* This compares favorably to earlier methods (administration by notables or collegiate bodies) where personal interests inevitably conflict and bring about compromises, delays, imprecision, and unreliability of outcomes.
* Bureaucracy also tends to promote the development of capitalism/the money economy. This is in four ways:

(1) It enhances the speed of business operations by promoting the objective regulation of work and an efficient chain of command;

(2) Stress on the calculability of rules promotes rational, effective decisions;

(3) Elimination of decision making based on personal, emotional, or irrational considerations;

(4) The specialization of business and commerce in relation to rational law/trained experts.

**Characteristics of Bureaucracy:**

* Weber’s key characteristics of bureaucratic administration:

(1) A hierarchically organized chain of command, clearly defined structure of offices, with specific responsibilities;

(2) Impersonal rules governing action over sentiment;

(3) Written, explicitly defined rights and duties of officials that have been properly enacted;

(4) Officials receive contractually fixed salaries and do not own their positions;

(5) A system of impersonal guidelines for dealing with/ defining work responsibilities based on typical cases/ technical, expert knowledge

(6) A clearly defined division of labor/functional specialization of tasks;

(7) Norms of impersonality govern interpersonal relations. People act as office holders;

(8) People treated in terms of ‘cases’ rather than as individuals by office-holders;

(9) Written documentation/files as preconditions to legitimate decision making;

(10) Discharge of responsibilities based on calculable rules carried out without regard for persons.

**Concept of the ‘Office’ in Bureaucratic Organization:**

* “Office” = a sphere of legal authority granted to an area of work under administrative jurisdiction of an official
* Office holders are required to take appropriate training/examinations to render them *experts* in the area
* Tasks and duties are defined according to legal rules
* Officials are formally outside the ownership of the means of production, and face consequences if breaking legal rules/showing corruption or favoritism
* A degree of social respectability is associated with office-holding in some instances
* Appointment, not election, is the means of appointment (the latter undermines bureaucracy through outside authority)

**Bureaucracy and Law:**

* In considering the relationship between bureaucratic decision making and legal development, Weber distinguished:

(1)Empirical decision making (which excludes ethical/moral considerations and focuses on consistency of facts and their reduction into ‘techniques’); and

(2) Rational adjudication by precedent (which resists standards of equity/fairness and favors the status of elites by restricting procedures to ‘hallowed tradition”)

* Weber asserts that as society evolved historically, the latter gave way to the former.

**The Leveling of Social Differences:**

* Weber felt that dominant, bureaucratic administration in modern society had a leveling effect:

- Conforming to norms which emphasize standard procedure

- “Horror” at privilege and the social prerogatives of elites

- Intolerance for closed status groups in favor of universal

access/ mobility

- Containment of the authority of officialdom so that public

opinion can be expressed widely/ help establish consensus

**Consequences of Bureaucracy:**

Two downsides of bureaucracy:

(1) Undermining democratic government (e.g. public acquiescence to “experts”; manipulation by powerful interest groups);

(2) The tendency to develop secrecy with regard to knowledge and intentions, excluding the public from decision making and the production of consensus.