

BOOK REVIEW

BUREAUCRACY

by

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Eugene Kamenka and Martin Krygier (eds.), *Bureaucracy: The Career of a Concept*, Edward Arnold, London and Melbourne, 1979, pp. 165 + ix. Price: \$9.95.

Those who are concerned with high matters of state, Hegel argued in Section 296 of the *Philosophy of Right*, 'abandon subjective interests and develop the habit of adopting a universal point of view.' This optimistic view of civil servants, administrators or bureaucrats might well be regarded as the high tide of bureaucratic prestige. Their importance had grown steadily from those remote times when kings discovered how useful it was to have around them nimble penmen who could remember what had been done about difficult cases in the past. These clerks were the custodians of memory, and instruments of communication. Their skill was literary, and their rising in the world

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has been more or less continuous. A tendency to become uppish was already detectable (so J.H. Hexter once argued) towards the end of the fifteenth century. It was, indeed, the possibility that these upstarts might begin to usurp their functions which led the aristocracy of the early sixteenth century to send their sons to school and university. And then, in early modern times, a world mad about power in all its forms discovered that these instruments of state could constitute a very great power indeed. Professors invented a science of administration, and absolute rulers were soon dreaming of a totally responsive instrument by which their slightest intention could be implemented in every part of the realm, however remote. Thus was born the idea of the machinery of government, and we live today amid its noisy grindings and clashings.

*Bureaucracy: The Career of a Concept* is concerned less with this development than with its sequel; and less indeed with its direct sequel than with administrators reflected in the minds of another and related class of men, the intellectuals. The first thinker treated in detail, Hegel's near-contemporary Saint-Simon, certainly attacked bureaucracy, but was responsible for the great dream that haunted all nineteenth century reformers: namely that the government of men would give way to the administration of things. Saint-Simon, poor booby, thought that this would lead to diminution of the power of the state, ignoring what now seems well established: that *nothing* can achieve that. Martin Krygier, who writes the central spine of the book elaborating these ideas, finds Saint-Simon's remarks full of incoherence since his

'schemes are riddled with men instructing, exhorting, managing and organising other men.' Saint-Simon's ambivalence towards the instrument of state power was shared by Marx who, in criticising Hegel's argument in the *Philosophy of Right*, explicitly substituted the pejorative word *Burokratie* for Hegel's more respectful *Regierungsgewalt* and *Staatsbeamten*. Marx certainly rejected Hegel's view that the civil servants represented the universal interest. He believed them to have a closed interest of their own, one that was merely intensified by their hierarchical structure. But his understanding of bureaucracy was fundamentally determined by his analysis of society in terms of class conflict: the bureaucracy could not be a *class*, merely a servant of classes. One of the fascinations of Martin Krygier's treatment of this passage of intellectual history is to observe the way in which the thoughts of generations of socialists revolved around this arcane definitional point until the moment when various men among them, most dramatically Trotsky just at the end of his life, came to think of bureaucracy as an independent force in its own right.

It was Max Weber who took bureaucracy seriously as central to the rationality of modern European civilisation. His account of bureaucracy as an ideal type brings out very clearly the way in which a bureaucratically regulated life is subject continually to the pressure of abstraction, and with Weber for the first time one may glimpse the possibility - for most people, indeed, including Weber himself, the nightmare - of a society in which *everything* has been bureaucratized.

So far as Weber is concerned, bureaucracy is an instrument of domination, a point whose significance is hard to assess because Weber believed that *all* forms of rule are forms of domination. Domination is not only a word which tends to obliterate the distinction between master/slave on the one hand and ruler/subject on the other; it also describes the tax-collecting functions of a bureaucracy much better than, say, modern welfare functions or other ways in which the administrator serves the community. But what Weber did argue forcefully was that the significance of bureaucracy is not to be judged in terms of its direct consequences; his fear was the spread of the bureaucratic ethos throughout society. He feared a world 'filled with nothing but these little cogs, with nothing but men clinging to a little job and striving after a slightly bigger one...'

The whole subject of bureaucracy developed a new lease of life in the wake of the communist revolutions from Russia in 1917 down to China, Yugoslavia and Cuba. Lenin had earlier believed that administration under socialism would be a simple task but before long he was saying 'We are not utopians. We know that an unskilled labourer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration.' Lenin's remarks are nearly all tactical, and Krygier points out that many of them are self-contradictory. They revolve around the question of what the victorious proletariat will do with the existing state machine - join it? or destroy it? His stronger instinct was clearly to achieve 'the transformation of the whole state economic mechanism into a single huge machine.' Such may indeed have been Lenin's fatal achievement, since

by the 1930's Trotsky was arguing that the Revolution had been betrayed by a stratum of self-seeking bureaucrats. But it was very late in the day indeed before he took the heretical step of recognising the possibility of the bureaucracy operating as an independent historical agent in its own right. This step had already been taken by various earlier thinkers, who had introduced into revolutionary thought the idea of a new class.

Eugene Kamenka and Alice Erh-Soon Tay contribute a chapter which puts bureaucracy into a context of the theory of despotism and discusses the work of Jan Wacław Machajski, the Polish revolutionary who in *The Intellectual Worker* (published in 1905) argued that the intellectuals were snatching the fruits of the proletarian revolution from the jaws of the workers. This continues a line of thought going back to at least the eighteenth century and expressing itself most characteristically in describing the bureaucracy in terms of disease metaphors. It is the growth of this attitude towards the bureaucracy which makes Hegel's treatment of the institution, mentioned at the beginning of this review, the highpoint of bureaucracy's reputation in Europe. But Kamenka and Tay cut against this grain, and deprecate the tendency to turn bureaucracy into a scapegoat, bogey, aunt sally or sacrificial lamb. They want to insist on the essentially dependent character of the bureaucracy: 'It is not the transmission belt that drives the engine... Eichmann may have been a bureaucrat; Hitler was not ... ideology kills more people than bureaucracy.' This view is a useful corrective to what they reasonably enough stigmatise as an

unthinking reflex hostility towards the bureaucrat, but it is an argument still conducted within the Marxist paradigm of asking whether the bureaucracy is a *class*, where the word 'class' stands for a fundamental entity which can independently determine other features of society, which are seen as essentially consequences. It is also within the Marxist paradigm in having as its central concern the question whether bureaucracy has been an independent factor in the mass movements of our century. But much of the hostility towards the bureaucracy comes from the way in which it replaces freely chosen arrangements between individuals, who increasingly lose their autonomy and suffer incorporation in standardised social policies, a tendency leading towards a rigid and unadventurous kind of life.

Robert Brown rounds off the volume by taking a close look at what is plausible in Max Weber's suggestion that bureaucracy is indispensable 'for the needs of mass administration today.' It is a mistake, he suggests, to regard bureaucrats as being highly skilled: 'Far from being an organisation of highly qualified experts, a typical bureaucracy is, for the most part, an organisation in which relatively unskilled workers become adept at performing routine tasks.' It is in part this characteristic which accounts for the remarkable persistence of bureaucracies, which Brown attributes to a form of negative feedback which maintains the character of the work flow and the pattern of life within the organisation at a point of stable equilibrium. But recent students of the subject have suggested that this classical form of administration, which is bureaucracy properly so-called, is necessarily

giving way to a more fluid structure in which computers are incorporated in the work of flexible groups whose work responds much more to the changing contours of the problems to be dealt with, whose organisation is no longer hierarchical and from which the rigidity of the classic bureaucracy has disappeared. This possibility contrives to give something like a happy ending to the study of a phenomenon with all the charm of a death watch beetle and which threatens to eat its way into every area of modern life. One significant instrument of this spreading influence, incidentally, is the modern vogue for inventing ever more elaborate rights. Every new right, or extension of an old right, has as its dark side the spread of inspectors, regulating agencies, tribunals and other bits of administrative apparatus.

*Bureaucracy: The Career of a Concept* is then, a highly serviceable volume for anyone seeking to understand bureaucracy from a variety of perspectives. The possibility of imbalance arising from the fact that over half the book is written by one of the editors, Martin Krygier, works in fact to its advantage by giving an historical stiffening to the other contributions. It is written with much clarity and indeed some wit. It is a useful addition to an attractive series.