

Sanket Sunand Dash, Mousumi Padhi*

Relevance of Max Weber's Rational Bureaucratic Organizations in Modern Society**

Abstract

Despite evolution of management thought, Max Weber's theory of bureaucracy continues to be a classical theory whose prescriptive elements guide the nature of organizations and their structures and processes. In the wake of information, communication and technological revolution which is reshaping the structure and processes in modern day organizations, the paper re-examines the basic premises and constructs of Max Weber's rational bureaucratic organizations and their relevance today. Weber's contribution to social sciences in general and organization studies in particular, is both methodological as well as empirical. The paper discusses the context in which Max Weber originally propounded his theory. In so doing, the paper also draws similarities of his theory with that proposed by other management thinkers of his time. Few examples of modern-day organizations and also different cross-national contexts are examined to discuss the present-day relevance of Weber's postulates. It is suggested that despite the ever-present portents of its demise, bureaucracy will continue to guide the dominant form of organizations in the near future because of its inherent rational character.

Keywords: Max Weber, rational bureaucratic organization, cross-national, modern day organizations

(JEL: B1, B3, M14)

Relevance of Max Weber's Rational Bureaucratic Organizations in Modern Society

Max Weber's theory of rational bureaucratic organization has had a strong influence on organization theory. Despite evolution of management thought, it continued to be a classical theory whose prescriptive elements have guided the nature of organizations and their structures and processes in the last century. The information communication and technological revolution is not only reshaping the nature of work but also how work is performed. It is in this context that a need is felt to re-examine

* Sanket Sunand Dash (corresponding author), Xavier University Bhubaneswar, Xavier School of Human Resource Management, India. Email: sanket@xshrm.edu.in

Mousumi Padhi, Xavier University Bhubaneswar, Xavier School of Human Resource Management, India. Email: mousumi@xshrm.edu.in.

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the basic premises and constructs of Max Weber's contribution to understand its applicability for modern day organizations.

Along with Karl Marx and Emil Durkheim, Max Weber is sometimes classified as one of the three principal architects of modern social science (Sung Ho, 2017). His contribution to sociology includes postulating new theoretical approaches to study society, especially the concept of Methodological Universalism; using social variables, including religion, to explain economical facts; and explaining the sources of authority in social institutions. Some seminal books of Weber include the "The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism" and "Economics and Society". In the management discipline, he is well-known for his work on types of authority and characteristics of organizational bureaucracy. Given Weber's eclectic interest across multiple disciplines, his essays and books have touched upon variety of subjects such as sociology of religion; role of religion in economic growth; and three-component theory of stratification in society. This article specifically focuses on Weber's contributions to organization theory and management science, where his seminal contribution lies in his analysis of bureaucratic form of management (Hall, 1963). Weber explicated the defining principles of bureaucracy in the essay 'On Bureaucracy'. The essay was part of his book titled 'Economy and Society' that was posthumously published in 1922 and translated into English in 1946. The word "bureaucracy" was coined by the Frenchman Vincent de Gournay in 1745 (Riggs, 1979), who viewed it as a type of government where red-tapism and apathy of government officials thwarted business activity (Starbuck, 2005). Weber questioned the pejorative usage of the term "bureaucracy". He suggested that bureaucracy, as an ideal type, was the system of governance that provided the highest degree of efficiency and hence could be classified as the most rational type of institutionalized authority over fellow human beings (Wren & Bedeian, 1994). The Weberian conceptualization of bureaucracy flows from his exposition of how people and institutions develop authority and hold on to it.

Biographical Background

To be able to gain an insight into the nature and range of Max Weber's essays, it is pertinent to look at his early childhood and educational training. Max Weber, christened as Maximilian Karl Emil Weber, was born on 21 April 1864 in an upper-middle class Prussian family. His father was a successful lawyer who dabbled in politics and his mother was a deeply religious lady. This tension between material success and religious asceticism perhaps informed his fields of study which included the interaction between religion and economic success and the sources of state legitimacy. By training, Max Weber was a lawyer who obtained his doctorate in 1889 and his habilitation in 1891. His theses focused on the historical antecedents behind the legislation of specific laws. He maintained an interest in active politics and

was one of the founding fathers of German Democratic Party. He died in June 1920 (Mitzman, 2017)

Max Weber's Bureaucratic Theory

Weber's theory of bureaucracy was linked to his analyses of the sources of power and conflict in organizations, the systems of authority in organizations and the relationship of those systems to the broader socio-historical dynamics (Hinings & Greenwood, 2001). The concept of domination is a key element in Weber's thought system (Roth, 1978). Weber indicated that authority in organizations is expressed through institutionalized authority systems (Lounsbury & Carberry, 2005) and identified three pure types of authority – rational-legal, charismatic and traditional (Weber, 1958). Rational-legal authority was based on rational principles and impersonal law; charismatic authority was based on the personal attributes of the leader and traditional authority was based on the sanctity of customs, beliefs and traditions. He viewed the ideal type of bureaucracy as a form of institutionalized rational-legal form of authority. As charismatic authority is person-specific and hence difficult to be institutionalized, Weber focused on tracking the transition from traditional authority to bureaucratic authority to understand the modern means of social and economic action (Lounsbury & Carberry, 2005).

The distinguishing characteristics of bureaucracy include division of labour, hierarchy of authority, extensive rules, separation of administration from ownership, and formal selection procedures based on technical skills (Weber, 1922). Division of labour refers to the breaking down of a complex activity into simple, routine and well-defined activities and assigning one routine and well-defined activity to a role. Hierarchy of authority refers to the specification of supervisors for each role. Extensive rules help to regulate the behaviour of the job holders in the performance of their roles as well as in their interactions with supervisors. The separation of administration from ownership becomes important as organizations become larger in size and owners need professional talent to manage them. The use of formal selection procedures is required to ensure the prevalence of meritocracy and reduce the scope for nepotism by non-owner managers.

Weber's contribution to social sciences in general and organization studies is both methodological as well as empirical. Methodologically, Weber's approach can be classified as methodological individualism, which postulates that individual mental states cause the existence of new social phenomena via individual actions (Heath, 2015). New social phenomena are the result of the combined effect of multiple individual actions and the individual actions themselves are the outcome of subjective mental states rather than objective socio-economic conditions. Thus, according to Weber, new ideas, like Protestantism, that gain widespread social acceptance simultaneously motivate large number of people thereby leading to new social phenomena, like industrial capitalism. Weber's use of the methodological individualism ap-

proach in his works and his analysis of bureaucracy affected subsequent organization studies in three broad ways (Greenwood & Lawrence, 2005). First, Weber's focus on tracing the effect of historical events in determining the evolution of different forms of organizing highlighted the need for studying organizations in relation to their socio-historical context. Second, his study of the coordination and authority-related problems in modern organizations, which were particularly prominent in his explication of the characteristics of bureaucracy, influenced the development of organizational design studies. Third, his analysis of the comparative efficiency of the different types of organizing and his focus on cultural analysis helped researchers focus on the environment-organization relationship.

Another way to conceptualize Weber's contribution to organizational theory is to first categorize the broad questions that the field wishes to answer and then to map Weber's theories to one or more broad questions. Heugens (2005) followed a similar approach by first dividing the subject matter of organizational study into two broad complementary areas – the rationale for existence of firms ('why' theories of the firm) and the identification of processes through which the individual employee actions can be aligned to ensure collective outcomes ('how' theories of the firm). Weber's theory of bureaucracy, especially his conceptualization of rational-legal decision rules, was identified as an attempt to address both the two broad areas. The role of bureaucracy to improve efficiency by reducing business decisions to "calculable rules" answered the 'why' part. The how part is answered by the ability of bureaucracies to concentrate resources in the hands of capitalists because of the separation between ownership and management; ensure synchronization of activities by aiding officials to view themselves as cogs in a giant machine and ensuring legitimacy for organizational actions by avoiding arbitrary decisions.

Historical Context

Discussion of ideas without considering the historical context runs the risk of devaluing the importance of socio-economic circumstances in shaping the content of ideas. The historical context can not only help explain the emergence and popularity of ideas but also explain the similarity in the thought processes of unconnected individuals. Human beings think of devising solutions to some problem and, on many occasions, the problem is suggested by the socio-economic environment. In the marketplace of ideas, a body of work that finds acceptance among a group of people begins to be debated more frequently and this debate makes it more popular thereby leading to incremental improvements. Thus, the commonalities in the work of thinkers who belong to the same historical milieu even if they have not formally interacted with each other may be explained by the human genius to come up with similar ideas when confronted with similar socio-economic environments.

Weber's lifespan coincided with the second industrial revolution, which is dated between 1870–2014 (Mokyr, 1998). Germany was one of the key centres of the sec-

ond industrial revolution (Veblen, 1990). Conventional wisdom suggested that Germany and USA's industrial growth in the second industrial revolution was driven by large firms (Kinghorn & Nye, 1996) although empirical data casts doubt on the role of large firms in Germany (Kinghorn & Nye, 1996). Compared to the first industrial revolution, the second industrial revolution was characterized by greater interaction between science and technology and academic and industry with Germany being one of the more prominent countries in using scientific knowledge for improving technology (Mokyr, 1998). The prevailing beliefs in Germany about the positive roles of large firms in driving industrial growth and academic theoreticians in improving practice likely facilitated the work of academicians, such as Weber, who wanted to understand and analyse the new modes for coordinating the activities of increasingly large organizations. The role of the historical context is strengthened by the fact that a fellow German, Gustav Schmoller, had foreshadowed some of Weber's thought on bureaucracy in 1898 (Riggs, 1979). The common nature of technological and social change confronting Max Weber, Fredrick Taylor and Henri Fayol could explain the similarities in their thought.

Comparisons with Other Classical Management Thinkers

Organizational theorists classify Max Weber, along with Fredrick Taylor and Henri Fayol, in the classical school of organizational theory (Morgan, 1980). The classical school can be described using the metaphor of organizations as machines that are designed to convert inputs into pre-defined outputs (goals) with maximum efficiency (Morgan, 1980). The classical school focused almost entirely on the structure of the formal organization and almost all its prescriptions could be derived from four common themes (pillars) – division of labour, organizational hierarchy, focus on formal organization and span of control (Scott, 1961). As a result of its focus on structure, the classical school overlooks the contribution of behavioural sciences and the problems arising from human interactions (Scott, 1961).

The thematic commonalities between the three near contemporary writers who wrote in different languages (Taylor in English; Fayol in French and Weber in German) and never interacted might be explained by their common socio-economic and technical environment. United States of America (USA), Germany, United Kingdom (UK) and France were the largest industrial goods producer in the world in 1914 with the USA, UK and Germany producing around two-thirds of the global output of industrial goods (Chandler, 1992). Economics of scale and scope had been identified as the prime driver of organizational efficiency in the second industrial revolution (Chandler, 1992). Exploiting economies of scale and scope requires firms to become larger, in terms of asset value as well as employee size. The growth in average employee size of firms spurred the need to identify new ways of managing larger groups of people effectively. Weber, Taylor and Fayol were, in a sense, trying to answer the same question and hence came to roughly similar theories.

Despite the commonalities with Taylor's and Fayol's theories, Weber's theory differs from them in several respects. Firstly, Weber was an academician who studied contemporary society to understand cultural changes while Taylor and Fayol were practitioners who wanted to make organizations more efficient (Wren & Bedeian, 1994). Taylor was a consulting engineer who held multiple patents and had large corporates as his clients (Schachter, 2010) and Fayol was the Managing Director of Comambault, one of France's largest companies, for twelve years (Wren, Bedeian, & Breeze, 2002). On the other hand, Weber is better classified as a student of culture than a classical management thinker (Clegg, 2005).

The occupational differences are also reflected in the authors' views regarding the ethicality of their models. In contradistinction to Taylor and Fayol who visualized their theoretical models as a force for good, Weber thought of the increased goal-oriented rationalization of society, of which bureaucracy was an important part, as an iron cage (Weber, 1985). Weber believed in existentialist freedom i.e. the capability of individuals to give meaning to their existence and value pluralism i.e. the right of individuals to select their own values (Tijsterman & Overeem, 2008) and hence characterized the calculative and optimizing nature of bureaucracy as an iron cage. This viewpoint contrasted with Taylor's who characterized both the conventional management of the era and his own views using theologically and morally-laden terms (Boddewyn, 1961). He classified conventional management principles as wrong, injustice and character deterioration and his own views as right, just and virtuous (Boddewyn, 1961).

Weber's theory of management was based on this theory of authority and hence it has, arguably, a broader scope of application than his contemporaries, which focused only on structuring of work activities. Weber's conceptualization of charismatic authority has played an important role in shaping current leadership theory (Houghton, 2010). Charismatic authority arises from personal characteristics of the leader and it is well-suited for turbulent environments (Houghton, 2010). Understanding charismatic leadership also requires inputs from behavioural sciences.

Challenges, Empirical Validity and Current Relevance

The theories proposed by Weber and other contemporary management thinkers aimed to achieve more efficiency. While the need to achieve efficiency remains a constant cry of organizations today, the assumptions behind Weber's theory and its applicability in the modern world are being questioned. An important aspect of Weber's theory is the conflation of the rational and the legal. Weber assumed a multi-pronged relationship between bureaucracy and the law (Weber, 1968; Jennings, Schulz, Patient, Gravel, & Yuan, 2005). First, the bureaucracy will increase in size to implement both governmental laws as well as organizational rules. Second, the scope of law will expand to cover more areas of human activity. Third, the laws will gradually evolve to become more rational (Weber, 1968). The assumption regarding

the proliferation of laws and consequent increase in bureaucratic staff has been empirically validated (Dobbin & Sutton, 1978). However, investigation into the evolution of a single law in Canada suggested that legal evolution follows a punctuated equilibrium model of growth and revision, with occasional contractions, instead of the smooth, linear, rational evolution of laws envisaged by Weber (Jennings et al., 2005). The punctuated equilibrium model of legal evolution, with revisions partially dictated by political changes and exogenous global factors (Jennings et al., 2005), casts doubts on the rationality of the bureaucracy that exists to enforce laws and rules efficiently.

One of the main criticisms of the Weberian theories of bureaucracy is that it was applicable for the industrial ('early' modern society) but not for the post-industrial ('late' modern society) (Hoogenboom & Ossewaarde, 2005). The rationale of the view lies in the argument that Weberian conceptualization of authority as "the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (Weber, 1968, p.212) is no longer tenable in the late modern society due to the democratization of the knowledge production process. However, Hoogenboom and Osward (2005) do not provide any empirical evidence for their views or consider the uneven industrialization of the world.

The perceived inadequacy of Weberian theories for the modern age is also reflected in the declining number of articles citing Weber over time (Lounsbury & Carberry, 2005). An analysis of the articles published in *Administrative Science Quarterly* (ASQ) from 1956 to 2002 showed that the proportion of articles citing Weber dropped from a crest of 36.5 percent in 1961 to a low of 6.8 percent in 1991 before increasing modestly to 15 % in 2002 (Lounsbury & Carberry, 2005). The decline in number of articles citing Weber was attributed to the increased focus on organization-environment fit and post-industrial organizations.

Weber's theory of bureaucracy has been one of the key inspirations behind contingency theory (Walton, 2005). The key terms in contingency theory are borrowed from bureaucracy. For example, horizontal differentiation corresponds to a fixed division of labour; vertical differentiation corresponds to a hierarchy of authority-based positions; written documents correspond to formalization; general rules correspond to standardization and use of expert personnel corresponds to task specialization. A meta-analysis of the empirical analysis of the key concepts of contingency theory suggest that the relations were broadly in line with Weber's theory (Walton, 2005). Task specialization, horizontal differentiation, vertical differentiation, decentralization, formalization and standardization were found to be positively related to each other with the average size of correlation being 0.54. Interestingly, the strength of the relationship between the variables persisted over time suggesting that the arguments over the demise of bureaucratic control are over-blown.

The persistence and growth of bureaucracy in the USA is also suggested by empirical research (Hamel & Zanini, 2016). The number of US private sector employees

working in organizations with more than 500 employees increased from 47 percent in 1993 to 51.6 percent in 2013. The increase was more marked in large organizations employing more than 5000 people (employed 33.4 percent of employees in 1993 compared to 29.4 percent in 2013). In line with the growth in the size of enterprises, the number of people in support roles (managers, supervisors and support staff) in the US workforce increased by 90 percent while the overall workforce grew by around 40 percent. This trend was also seen in other developed countries like United Kingdom (share of managers and supervisors in workforce grew from 12.9 percent in 2001 to 16 percent in 2015). Graeber (2015) suggests that rhetoric and reality about the role of bureaucracy in modern society are different. According to Graeber (2017), the neo-liberal rhetoric against bureaucracy is based on the assumptions that markets are efficient while governments are not; governments are highly bureaucratic and there is a structural opposition between the 'market' and bureaucracy. However, Graeber (2017) contends that this rhetoric masks the reality that bureaucracy is all pervasive in modern society and is best exemplified by the corporate organizational man.

Weber had recommended selecting candidates based on skills and knowledge rather than kinship. The increasing use of competency models for recruitment and selection of employees in organizations suggests intensification of this trend of selecting candidates in the future. Different organizations have defined their competency models in terms of the competencies and value-fit that they look for. An underlying principle for the competency-based recruitment is the continued emphasis on merit and skills. This would continue to be relevant as organizations try to retain their competitive positions.

What seems to have perhaps changed in current-day organizations is the greater adoption of differentiation as a competitive strategy for succeeding in the market. This strategy has facilitated a move from coercive control through rules to normative control. In organizations in the information technology (IT) domain, such as Facebook, Google and Netflix, the flexible leave policy and expenditure reimbursement policy defines the move from strict rules defining how and when leave of absence is to be availed to more liberal guidelines regarding reimbursement of travel and accommodation expenditure. This is also theoretically supported by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) who contend that contemporary capitalism supports new structures of normative control. More specifically, they argue that capitalism, beyond its unchallenged advantages regarding productivity and the production of material prosperity, also evoked criticism for inherently creating alienation, oppression, various inequalities and precariousness among working people. Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) explain that modern organizational thinking (at least in the developed countries) has reacted to parts of this criticism by granting highly productive employees more autonomy and options for self-actualization. In other words, modern organizational structures are stressing "agency utility" (through higher degrees of

freedom) rather than the reduction of “agency costs” (through bureaucratic control).

The organizations in the IT domain and other modern sectors have become flatter and less hierarchical without compromising on the effectiveness of their communication process. Weber had prescribed hierarchy as a means for achieving efficiency and clarity in communication and properly demarcating individual's spheres of authority and responsibility. Organizations in the modern sectors focus on clear, transparent and two-way communication and, despite the reduction in hierarchy, are still able to achieve the desired results in efficiency and clarity due to improvements in communication technology. The super-ordinate goal of bureaucracy being efficiency, its importance continues to prevail in organizations but the means of achieving it have changed. The information communication and technological (ICT) revolution has facilitated quicker and faster means of communication. The business of the organizations in the examples is based on the ICT revolution, which as Mr Bill Gates points out at changes at the ‘speed of thought’. Therefore, it becomes imperative for these organizations to encourage innovation by providing some amount of autonomy. For autonomy to succeed, the process of two-way communication must be encouraged. As a corollary to the phenomena of de-bureaucratization in the organizations focusing on differentiation, it may seem that organizations competing in the low-cost category would continue to focus on cost-efficiency and formal rules and hierarchy. In essence, it may be reflected that bureaucracy in the original Weberian sense has not diminished. In the “low value added” sections of the value chain its relevance will continue to grow in the current era of increased digitalization spurred by lower monitoring costs.

Future Direction

Weber's theory of bureaucracy was formulated to explain the social and organizational changes in a rapidly industrializing Germany. The industrial revolution was an epochal event that moved hundreds of thousands of rural people to the industrial cities. The change of location coincided with a change in the organizational settings of work. Most of the new laborers were earlier self-employed farmers or agricultural laborers and hence were subject to no authority or traditional authority. The traditional means of authority with their focus on maintaining power relations were unsuitable for the factories where the owners and workers had no shared history and the prime objective was optimizing productivity rather than maintaining traditions. Hence, organizations became increasingly bureaucratic.

A century of rapid technological changes has passed by since Weber formulated the theory of bureaucracy. The western world has moved to the post-industrial society dominated by information processing rather than manufacturing firms and this has led to questions about the appropriateness of bureaucracy. However, it is important to understand that although the transition from farms to factories has occurred long

back in Germany, it is still occurring in many parts of the world like India and Africa. In India, for example, there is a substantial difference in the productivity levels of the organized sector (units employing more than 10 employees) and unorganized sector (units employing fewer than 10 employees). The movement of people from unorganized to organized sector is a pre-requisite for increases in productivity and well-being and this movement will necessarily be accompanied by subjection to bureaucratic authority. Even in the USA, which has been the home of majority of the giant information technology firms, there has been an increase in the number of bureaucrats. Thus, it is likely that despite the ever-present portents of its demise, bureaucracy will continue to be the dominant form of organizations in the near future because of its inherent rational character.

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