CHAPTER 1

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The organizational society

Introduction

In subsequent chapters we will be looking in detail at some specific aspect of organizations and examining associated theories and research. In this first chapter, however, our primary intention is to emphasize the wider social relevance of organization studies.

All too often in the field of organization studies (and in many other areas of academic study) the important issues which give the subject its original impetus are lost sight of as the ‘total phenomenon’ is broken down into sub-disciplines, dimensions, variables, etc. Academic, or ‘scientific’, analysis usually takes the form of this progressive dissection. The advantage of this process is that we may promote analysis of structure by minute attention to the nature and relations of the parts. The disadvantage is that the whole and its effects disappear from view. This may not be too serious from a purely academic standpoint. And it may be a positive advantage from the point of view of those who wish to focus attention on lower level, specific problems with regard to organizations. For example, there has been a great deal of research focusing on specific factors within organizations which facilitate or impede efficiency at various levels. Concepts and theories are then generated which are relevant to those issues. But it is a serious loss as far as some of the wider issues and problems are concerned.

The problem of bureaucracy is a good example of this and that is why Chapter 1 takes it as a major theme. Industrial societies are increasingly dominated in all spheres by large, complex organizations, staffed by full-time, expert officials, acting in accordance with detailed rules. The power of such organizations and their officials is great, and the processes of control exercised by, and within, them are constantly being refined. Just what aspect of bureaucratic control is seen as prob-
lemmatic depends on the particular values and concerns of the observer. This chapter concentrates on aspects connected with the deceptive control exercised by seemingly ‘impersonal’ processes, and the alienating effects on individuals. It does not pursue other aspects, such as the influential criticism by Talcott Parsons and Alvin Gouldner of earlier conceptualizations of bureaucracy on the grounds that they did not distinguish between authority based on expertise and that based on position in a hierarchy. (Cf. Albrow 1970.) On the whole, our emphasis is on the great extent to which bureaucratic hierarchies successfully co-opt expertise into their control systems.

1 The concept of bureaucracy

There has been a widespread political concern about bureaucracy for more than two hundred years. It was thought by the English to be a French ‘disease’, and the view was shared by some Frenchmen: Balzac’s novel of 1836, Les Employés, has been described as being at least half a treatise on bureaucracy, and in it he set the vituperative tone for many subsequent discussions of the subject: ‘... Bureaucracy, the giant power wielded by pigmies ....’ (Albrow 1970 p. 18).

The ‘disease’ spread, however, and we find a motion condemning ‘the continued growth of bureaucracy’ being put forward in the House of Commons in 1968.

Max Weber, the German sociologist, was responsible for providing the most influential and systematic social scientific analysis of the phenomenon of bureaucracy. He judged it to be the most important development of modern industrial society — indispensable to both capitalism and socialism:

The development of the modern form of the organization of corporate groups in all fields is nothing less than identical with the development and continued spread of bureaucratic administration. This is true of church and state, of armies, political parties, economic enterprises, organizations to promote all kinds of causes, private associations, clubs, and many others ... Its development, largely under capitalistic auspices, has created an urgent need for stable, strict, intensive, and calculable administration. It is this need which gives bureaucracy a crucial role in our society as the central element in any kind of large-scale administration. (Weber 1964 pp 337–8)

Bureaucracy has certainly been a problem for democrats in capitalist societies (the problem of controlling multinational corporations is an
example, as are issues of civil service power, privacy of the individual, and ‘red tape’), but it has been no less of a problem for socialist societies. Marx tended to neglect the subject (although see Perez-Diaz 1975 for a discussion of Marx’s ideas on bureaucracy in relation to state and society), and even the great realist Lenin began to sound unrealistic when it came to explaining how the new socialist bureaucracy would bring about the withering away of bureaucracy:

_We ourselves_, the workers, will organize large-scale production on the basis of what capitalism has already created, relying on our own experience as workers, establishing strict, iron discipline supported by the state power of the armed workers; we will reduce the role of the state officials to that of simply carrying out our instructions as responsible, revocable, modestly paid ‘foremen and book-keepers’ (of course, with the aid of technicians of all sorts, types and degrees). This is our proletarian task, this is what we can and must _start_ with in accomplishing the proletarian revolution. Such a beginning, on the basis of large-scale production, will of itself lead to the gradual ‘withering away’ of all bureaucracy, to the gradual creation of an order, an order without quotation marks, an order bearing no similarity to wage slavery, an order in which the functions of control and accounting – becoming more and more simple – will be performed by each in turn, will then become a habit and will finally die out as the _special_ functions of a special section of the population. (Lenin 1970 pp 57–8)

1.1 Control

‘Bureaucracy’ is a good concept to begin with in starting a book on organizations because it has proved so durable and flexible in expressing so many of the concerns that people have had about their own relations with organizations. The quotations at the beginning of this chapter express some of these concerns as they have been felt by people with varied interests and outlooks. Most of these concerns can be summed up under the heading of control. They are concerns having to do with the ways in which modern complex organizations exercise control in society – both internally with respect to their members, and externally with respect to their environment. Most of the early writers on bureaucracy had this as their major interest (e.g. Max Weber and Robert Michels especially) and they would not have thought it fruitful to divorce questions of internal organizational control from issues of external control. Their belief that the two sets of issues are intimately related was probably well founded, and the study of organizations is impoverished when it rigidly separates them. We will reject the kind of
view that suggests the modern study of organizations is necessarily different in this respect, as for instance in the unfortunate distinctions drawn in the second half of the following statement:

In modern society it is impossible to escape from the influence of organizations of one type or another. It was an awareness of this influence that encouraged the early sociologists to develop their interest in organizations. As seen already, however, this interest differs from the interest of present-day sociologists. The difference between the two is not simply the difference between the levels of analysis — whether macro or micro — but also between an interest in the external political sphere of society and the internal political structure of the organizations. (Dunkerley 1972 p 2)

In fact, it can be argued that the central questions for sociologists in this field are still those posed by Weber. His achievement was precisely in showing how systems of internal organizational control were intimately related to wider systems of control of social action. In particular, it should be made clear that, although the earlier, nineteenth-century interest in bureaucracy was a reflection of a debate about the place of public officials in developing governmental machines, it was still a debate about who (which people) control whom. Weber was a pivotal figure for the subsequent development of this debate in a direction which makes it relevant to current issues. For he represents a shift from this older perspective, with which he began, to a concern with the control of men by organizational rules — control by impersonal rather than personal factors. In other words, whilst it may be true that nineteenth-century writers on bureaucracy focused on the problem of the civil service in a democracy, the modern sociology of organizations’ concern, stemming from Weber, is with the relation between organizational systems of action and the individual actor.

2 Different uses of the concept

Although social scientists are often accused of inventing unnecessary new terminology to conceal a poverty of ideas, the failing is somewhat different in the case of the term bureaucracy. Here there seems to be a ‘poverty of terminological inventiveness’ or, more specifically, a process of ‘terminological conservation and conceptual change’ (Albrow 1970 pp 120–3). The same term is used to refer to a variety of things, depending on the particular interest of the layman or social scientist concerned. We will confine ourselves to discussing two of the most
influential usages: bureaucracy as rational organization, and bureaucracy as modern society.

2.1 Bureaucracy as rational organization

Most of the social scientists who adopt this conceptual strategy claim to be following the usage of Max Weber, but, they would add, only after first correcting Weber's conceptual ambiguity. For example, Peter Blau states:

Weber conceived of bureaucracy as a social mechanism that maximizes efficiency and also as a form of social organization with specific characteristics. Both these criteria cannot be part of the definition, since the relationship between the attributes of a social institution and its consequences is a question for empirical verification and not a matter of definition (Blau 1963 p 251).

Blau and others choose to interpret Weber's description of bureaucracy as 'rational organization' as being a definition of bureaucracy in the sense of an 'organization that maximizes efficiency in administration'. (Blau 1956 p. 60) They then find this to be inconsistent with what they take to be his list of a priori essential characteristics of bureaucratic organization. Blau states that Weber saw the following list of characteristics as making up his 'ideal', pure or most rational type of bureaucracy:

1 specialization of tasks;
2 a hierarchy of authority;
3 a system of rules;
4 impersonality;
5 employment based on technical qualifications, and constituting a career;
6 efficiency. (Blau 1956 pp 28–31)

Blau then goes on to show that efficiency may not always be best served by some of the other characteristics in the list. For example, he notes that in his own study of a federal law-enforcement agency, efficiency was often best served by unofficial practices and informal personal relations among the staff, in contravention of the rules and disregarding formal impersonal structures. One of his major conclusions was that: 'Maximum rationality in the organization, therefore, depends on the ability of operating officials to assume the initiative in establishing informal relations and instituting unofficial practices that eliminate
But Blau is misleading in suggesting that Weber equated rationality with efficiency. In referring to the formal rationality of bureaucracy, Weber had in mind formal procedures involving correct calculation — either in numerical terms, as with finance and statistics, or in logical terms, as with law. Such calculations are formal procedures which allow us to determine what level of efficiency has been reached, but they do not in themselves guarantee efficiency. To put it another way: Weber was all too aware that formal rationality did not guarantee material or substantive rationality (the most efficient attainment of goals or values). He sometimes spoke of the 'paradox of consequences' whereby highly rational procedures frustrated or defeated the purposes and values which had inspired them. For example, bureaucracy might be democracy's most rational form of administration, but sometimes it was also its worst enemy.

In fact, far from Weber's definition of the concept of bureaucracy being set in the context of a discussion of organizational efficiency, it is set in the context of a larger discussion of authority as a form of control (or 'imperative co-ordination'). He distinguished between power and authority along the lines that, whereas power referred to any relationship where one member could enforce his will despite resistance, authority existed when obedience to commands rested on a belief in their legitimacy — a belief that orders were justified and that it was right to obey. It was this idea of legitimacy which provided him with his criterion for classifying organizations. Along with different forms of belief in the legitimacy of authority went different authority structures and corresponding forms of organization. Three kinds of authority were distinguished: charismatic authority, based on the sacred or outstanding characteristic of the individual; traditional authority, based on respect for custom; rational legal authority, based on a code of legal rules and regulations. The purest type of exercise of rational legal authority was that which employed a bureaucratic administrative staff.

Weber's full list of ten bureaucratic characteristics should not be taken in isolation from his longer list of preceding propositions on legitimacy and authority. He first of all set out five related beliefs on which the legitimacy of legal authority depended; this was followed by eight propositions about the structuring of legal authority systems; and finally, the ten characteristics of bureaucratic administration based on

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1 Of course most organizations contain a mixture of all these elements, but Weber was concerned with distinguishing the most logically pure types of combinations of authority and administration. These were not simply abstract types, however, but were typical of actual historical periods and circumstances.
these rational legal principles. The legitimacy of legal authority depends on the following beliefs:

i That a legal code can be established which can claim obedience from members of the organization.
ii That the law is a system of abstract rules which are applied to particular cases; and that administration looks after the interests of the organization within the limits of that law.
iii That the man exercising authority also obeys this impersonal order.
iv That only qua member does the member obey the law.
v That obedience is due not to the person who holds the authority but to the impersonal order which has granted him this position. (Albrow 1970 pp 43–5)

On the basis of these conceptions of legitimacy Weber formulated his propositions about the structuring of legal authority systems:

a Official tasks are organized on a continuous, regulated basis.
b These tasks are divided into functionally distinct spheres, each furnished with the requisite authority and sanctions.
c Offices are arranged hierarchically, the rights of control and complaint being specified.
d The rules according to which work is conducted may be either technical or legal. In both cases trained men are necessary.
e The resources of the organization are quite distinct from those of the members as private individuals.
f The office holder cannot appropriate his office.
g Administration is based on written documents and this tends to make the office (Bureau) the hub of modern organization.
h Legal authority systems can take many forms, but are seen at their purest in a bureaucratic administrative staff. (Albrow 1970 pp 43–5)

Bureaucracy in its most rational form presupposed the preceding propositions on legitimacy and authority, and had the following characteristics:

1 The staff members are personally free, observing only the impersonal duties of their offices.
2 There is a clear hierarchy of offices.
3 The functions of offices are clearly specified.
Officials are appointed on the basis of a contract.

They are selected on the basis of a professional qualification, ideally substantiated by a diploma gained through examination.

They have a monetary salary, and usually pension rights. The salary is graded according to position in the hierarchy. The official can always leave the post, and under certain circumstances it may be terminated.

The official’s post is his sole or major concern.

There is a career structure, and promotion is possible either by seniority or merit, and according to the judgement of superiors.

The official may appropriate neither the post nor the resources which go with it.

He is subject to a unified control and disciplinary system. (Albrow 1970 pp 43–5. This is an abbreviation from Weber 1964 pp 329–34.)

Weber’s definition of rational organization is, therefore, significantly different from those of many who thought they were following him in conceptualizing bureaucracy as rational organization. The difference is particularly evident when Weber’s whole theoretical stance is compared with that of the management theorists. The latter tend to define organizations in a reified fashion as single entities with goals. And rational organization is then simply a matter of adopting whatever means are most efficient for attaining the goals. For Weber an organization (Verband) signified an ordering of social relationships, the maintenance of which certain individuals took as their special task. Thus the presence of a leader and usually an administrative staff was the defining characteristic of an organization. Furthermore,

Weber regarded the fact that human behaviour was regularly oriented to a set of rules (Ordnung) as basic to sociological analysis. The existence of a distinctive set of rules governing behaviour was intrinsic to the concept of an organization. Without them it would not be possible to say what was and what was not organizational behaviour... Commands and rules ranked as equally important factors in the structuring of social relationships. In an administrative order they were linked in that the rules regulated the scope and possession of authority. (Albrow 1970 pp 38–9)

The spread of the bureaucratic form of organization to all spheres was part of a general process of rationalization in modern society. The reason why it would inevitably spread was because its characteristics of precision, continuity, discipline, strictness and reliability made it tech-
nically the most satisfactory form of organization for those who sought to exercise organizational control.

Bureaucracy, therefore, meant control by experts — men with the skill and knowledge to be able to apply the technical rules and norms that govern the functioning of modern organizations. The importance of technical rules and of experts to interpret and apply them is summarized in two of Weber’s key statements: ‘Bureaucratic administration signifies authority on the basis of knowledge. This is its specifically rational character.’ (Weber 1964 p 339) And, ‘Bureaucratic authority is specifically rational in the sense of being bound to discursively analysable rules.’ (Weber 1964 p 361) The formal rationality of bureaucracy refers to the expert application of rules. And, as we have seen, Weber did not confuse such technical formal rationality with efficiency. It is worth noting Weber’s statements on this subject, delivered at a conference in Vienna in 1909. No one denied, he argued, the ‘technical superiority of the bureaucratic machine’. But when it came to comparing the national power position of different countries the German bureaucracy achieved far less than the corrupt machines of France and America.

Which kind of organization has at the moment the greatest ‘efficiency’ (to use an English expression) — private capitalistic expansion, linked to purely business officialdom, which is more easily open to corruption, or state direction under the highly moral enlightened authoritarianism of the German officialdom? (Quoted in Albrow 1970 p 64)

In other words, Weber was not trying to state a priori sufficient conditions for the attainment of any organizational goal. He was describing the form of administration that went along with rational legal authority — in contrast to the kinds of administration that accompanied two other quite different types of authority, the traditional and the charismatic. As this type of authority and administration spread it pushed out all other types. The reason for its triumph is not adequately summarized in the single word ‘efficiency’. Weber’s explanation for its success includes a wider list of operational virtues: precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs. Certain other developments in industrial society also favour the spread of bureaucracy, such as the speed up in communication and transport, the adoption of modern accounting methods, the demand for equal treatment by citizens in a democracy and the growth of mass production and mass administration. Weber was thus offering a
general theory of modern culture, centred on the process of progressive rationalization in all spheres. This leads us to the other common usage of the term bureaucracy:

2.2 Bureaucracy as modern society

Some theorists who have adopted this usage think in terms of forms of organization simply reflecting the economic or political character of the larger society. This is the view of Marx. But it is possible to see the process operating in the opposite direction as well so that bureaucratization is the subjection of society to the influence of the attitudes, values and techniques of bureaucrats. Why should this be the case?

The answer to this question of why bureaucracy as the administrative form of rational legal authority should spread so easily is that it moves into the vacuum left by the disappearance of administration based on traditional or charismatic types of authority. The control of members of modern organizations is rendered problematic because their commitment or allegiance is so partial. This contrasts with a traditional order in which participation in one social activity was closely intertwined with participation in all other activities, and where all these activities were regulated on the basis of norms and values sanctioned by ancient custom (although often backed by force as well). When this basis of order disappears the only alternatives are: (a) coercion based on naked power, (b) allegiance to a charismatic figure as in some religious or political sects, or else, (c) acceptance of rational legal authority specific to each activity. Because such authority is activity-specific, and because members’ commitments to that organizational activity are partial, there is a problem of control. Bureaucracy refers to the structure of control in organizations based on rational legal authority. As Perrow puts it:

For our purposes then, the bureaucratic model refers to an organization which attempts to control extra-organizational influences (stemming from the characteristics of personnel and changes in the environment) through the creation of specialized (staff) positions and through such rules and devices as regulations and categorization. (Perrow 1970 p 59)

3 Professionals and bureaucracy

There are some social scientists who have so defined bureaucracy as to be able to contrast it with a form of organization that relies on professional expertise. In so doing they suggest that the distinguishing characteristic of bureaucracy is a proliferation of detailed rules with close
surveillance to ensure members’ observance of those rules. This is then contrasted with organization based on professionals who do not require detailed rules or close surveillance. Weber himself did not make any such distinction, although he would probably have regarded both professional organization and bureaucracy as forms of administration based on the legal rational principles, but differing in the degree of specificity of the rules. Perhaps the real difference between the two types is pointed out in the comment by Perrow:

The less the expertise, the more direct the surveillance, and the more obtrusive the controls. The more the expertise, the more unobtrusive the controls. The best situation of all, though they do not come cheap, is to hire professionals, for someone else has socialized them and even unobtrusive controls are hardly needed. The professional, the prima donna of organizational theory, is really the ultimate eunuch — capable of doing everything well in that harem except that which he should not do, and in this case that is to mess around with the goals of the organization, or the assumptions that determine to what ends he will use his professional skills. (Perrow 1972 p 10)

The effect of this statement if accepted, is to minimize the difference between bureaucrats and professionals, at least as far as the issue of organizational control is concerned. For it implies that the actions of professionals in organizations are just as programmed as those of bureaucrats — the only difference being that they are more ‘pre-programmed’. Some people would dispute this on the grounds that professionals in many organizations seem to have more initiatory power and capacity to re-direct organizational goals. Obviously this must be a matter of degree: it will depend to a large extent on the type of profession involved, and the type of organization in which the professional is operating. Wilensky, in his ironically titled article ‘The Professionalization of Everyone?’, discusses some of the factors that affect the professionalization of an occupation and the subsequent preservation of such professional characteristics as autonomy and a ‘service’ ideal in different organizations. He notes that an increasing percentage of professionals work in complex organizations (scientists, engineers, teachers, architects, even lawyers and doctors) and that these organizations have non-professional control structures — bosses, not colleagues, rule. On the whole, the salaried professional has neither exclusive nor final responsibility for his work; he has to accept the final authority of non-professionals. But whether the professional in a bureaucracy manages to maintain some of the autonomy typical of the classical independent professional will depend on several factors:
The crux of the issue of autonomy for salaried professionals is whether the organization itself is infused with professionalism (as measured, say, by a large percentage of professionally trained employees and managers) and whether the services of the professionals involved are scarce (as measured by a large number of attractive job offers from the outside). (Wilensky 1970 p 491)

As for maintaining their professional ideals, such as disinterested service to clients, Wilensky maintains that it is not always the case that professionals in bureaucracies are less independent.

It is true that one of the main centers of resistance to Nazi terror in Germany between 1933 and 1939 was a bureaucratic profession—personified by Pastor Niemöller of the Protestant Confessional Church and some of the leading Catholic clergy. But it is also true that many salaried professors in Nazi Germany prostituted their scholarship to ends which they knew were false. Teachers generally were among the earliest and most enthusiastic recruits for the Nazi Party. At the same time, however, fee-taking lawyers were subverting the rule of law and fee-taking physicians were conducting bizarre medical experiments in the concentration camps. (Wilensky 1970 pp 491–2)

However, Wilensky does conclude that bureaucracy enfeebles the service ideal more than it threatens professional autonomy. In effect he seems to be saying that professionals pressured by the demands of a bureaucracy are more likely to sacrifice their clients’ interests than their own (and their profession’s) interests. But he goes on to suggest that this will vary depending on the particular role orientation of the professional, and whether that orientation is primarily towards the profession, the organization, or a social movement (political or religious) (Wilensky 1970 pp 494–8).

4 Bureaucracy and social control

Has the bureaucratization of society brought about a new and more effective control of individuals? And is that insidious control even more dangerous than previous tyrannies because it appears to be a ‘neutral’ force which is non-partisan and value-free?

According to Blau and Schoenherr,

The new forms of power that are developing in modern society are closely connected with the great efficiency of indirect mechanisms
of organizational control. Slave drivers have gone out of fashion not because they were so cruel but because they were so inefficient. Men can be controlled much more efficiently by tying their economic needs and interests to their performance on behalf of employers. Calling this wage slavery is a half-truth, which correctly indicates that workers dependent on their wages can be exploited as slaves can be, and which conveniently ignores the basic differences between economic exploitation and slavery. The efforts of men can be controlled still far more efficiently than through wages alone by mobilizing their professional commitments to the work they can do best and like to do most and by putting these highly motivated energies and skills at the disposal of organizations. (Blau and Schoenherr 1973 p 18)

The professionalization of organizations, in which decisions are made by technical experts, enhances both the internal efficiency and the external power of organizations. But the pursuit of efficiency is accompanied by an increase in insidious control. It is all the more dangerous because it is often not identified as power, and the individual may not experience it in terms of feeling oppressed. The individual operates less according to specific directives given by superiors, and more in accordance with an internal obligation to perform tasks in ways determined by an inherent rationality.

The pressure to make the most rational decision in terms of the interest of the organization requires that the recommendations experts make on the basis of their technical competence govern as much as possible such decisions of organizations as whether to shut down a plant and lay off its workers; in which city to build a new plant; whether to back the British pound against inflation or not; or in which company's stock to invest funds. Decisions like these have far-reaching implications for the lives of people, and sometimes they have deleterious consequences for society. But if experts have reached their recommendations on the basis of technical judgements, they cannot be censured for having arrived at these conclusions, because there is no animus in them, technical criteria govern them, and other experts would have reached the same conclusions. Whereas not all administrative decisions are based purely on technical grounds and exclude all political considerations, it is in the interest of organizations to make most decisions largely on these grounds. Inasmuch as experts judge issues in terms of universal criteria of rationality and efficiency, they cannot be blamed for the conclusions they reach, even though these conclusions may lead to actions of powerful organizations that are contrary to the interest of most people. (Blau and Schoenherr 1973 p 21)
This was the real issue that concerned Max Weber as far as bureaucracy was concerned. It lies behind some of the most stimulating discussions in the study of organizations that will be referred to in later chapters (especially those concerned with the various aspects of control within organizations — recruitment, selection, appraisal, decision-making, information flow, uncertainty reduction vis-à-vis external environment, etc.). It is also related to one of the main themes in contemporary sociology — the issue of social control versus individual freedom, as expressed in the contention of the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas that the element of choice for individuals in situations is being eroded by the spread of instrumental action systems (Habermas 1970).

Habermas defines instrumental action as purposeful rational behaviour that proceeds according to technical rules based on empirical knowledge. He views instrumental action systems as the result of the development of science and technology (Weber would add to these the concomitant development of bureaucratic administration) as major forces of production. The problem with such action systems is that it is not feasible to deviate from technical rules. In contrast with the breaking of social norms, which can be labelled deviant behaviour, and is punished by sanctions external to the norms, the breaking of technical rules is simply incompetent behaviour which is sanctioned by the immediate failure of the intended strategy. The claim to rationality thus becomes a legitimism in itself (an ideology) — hence the link between the study of bureaucracy and the political issue of the threat to democracy of technocracy.

The importance of Weber's contribution to the founding of the study of complex organizations was that it set out to explore the ways in which the incorporation of a particular kind of rationality into a particular form of administrative structure gave rise to a similar pattern of organization in quite diverse fields of activity. This book seeks to follow Weber in discussing both these sets of factors in organizations, for it is the combination of such factors that structures social action. A controversial statement by Blau and Schoenherr sets out in extreme form the point about the interrelationship between social problems, which provide the context within which we discuss organizations, and the theory and methodology which guides our analysis.

... in our sociological analysis as well as our political thinking, it is time that we 'push men finally out', to place proper emphasis on the study of social structure in sociology, and to recognize the power of organizations as the main threat to liberty in modern society. The enemy is not an exploitative capitalist or an imperialist general or a narrow-minded bureaucrat. It is no man. It is the efficient structure
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of modern organizations which enables the giant ones and their combinations to dominate our lives, our fortunes, and our honour. (Blau and Schoenherr 1971 p 357)

5 Alienation

Blau and Schoenherr are close to Max Weber’s position in their assertion about new forms of power that it is not individual or group interests such as those of the exploitative capitalist which are the main threat to liberty in modern society. Like Weber they reserve their deepest pessimism for the prospect of the domination of men by their own organizations. No doubt they have good cause for their pessimism and in this book we will examine many examples of the ways in which organizations seem to develop an entrenched logic of their own which is different from, and more than, a direct reflection of the interests of any single group or individual. In this respect the emphasis of non-Marxists regarding power in society has tended to be on the issue of rational bureaucracy rather than economic class struggle. However, it might seem that the organization theorists in this tradition do draw closer to the Marxists when it comes to discussing the likely consequences for the individual of these developments. They focus on alienation. But they differ from Marx in that they view alienation as the product of a particular form of organization — bureaucracy.

Marx’s emphasis upon the wage worker as being ‘separated’ from the means of production becomes, in Weber’s perspective, merely one special case of a universal trend. The modern soldier is equally ‘separated’ from the means of violence; the scientist from the means of enquiry, and the civil servant from the means of administration. Weber thus tries to relativize Marx’s work by placing it into a more generalized context and showing that Marx’s conclusions rest upon observations drawn from a dramatized ‘special case’, which is better seen as one case in a broad series of similar cases. The series as a whole exemplifies the comprehensive underlying trend of bureaucratization. Socialist class struggles are merely a vehicle implementing this trend. (Gerth and Mills 1948 p 50)

Some critics, such as Gouldner (1955), have condemned this ‘metaphysical pathos’ about bureaucracy and have sought to focus attention on the possibilities for reversing the process of bureaucratization and

2 Although this need not exclude the concomitant conclusion of the Marxists that bureaucracy is often an effective means of oppression in the class struggle.
alienation, on the grounds that 'if the world of theory is grey and foredoomed, the world of everyday life is green with possibilities which need to be cultivated'. (Gouldner 1954 p 29) Thus Gouldner in his study of the enforcement of rules in a gypsum plant found that morale and efficiency were higher when rules were not backed by close supervision and the threat of sanctions (Gouldner 1954). Other researchers claim to have found a persistent trend in modern organizations towards a decentralized and more flexible structure of authority (Likert 1961; Lawrence 1958; Guest 1962; Burns and Stalker 1961). Even military bureaucracies, which Weber and others regarded as the epitome of authoritarian bureaucratic organization, have recently been described as undergoing a shift towards less strict and rigid methods of control (Janowitz 1959).

5.1 Occupational differences

The nature of the rules in an organization and the degree of conformity and supervision that is expected and attached to them is obviously an important factor in either exacerbating or mitigating alienation. As Gouldner observed, 'In the last analysis, proliferation of...rules signify that management has, in effect if not intention, surrendered in the battle for the worker's motivation' (Gouldner 1954 p 175). We would expect to find some variation between organizations and even between occupational groups with respect to alienating conditions of work and alienated attitudes to work. Research cited by Blauner (1960) found the following differences between occupational groups regarding satisfaction with their work:

Table 1 Occupations and work satisfaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupational group</th>
<th>Mean Index*</th>
<th>Number in sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i Professional and managerial</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii Semi-professional, business, and supervisory</td>
<td>548</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iii Skilled, manual and white collar</td>
<td>510</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>iv Semi-skilled manual workers</td>
<td>483</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>v Unskilled manual workers</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(In this index, the figure 100 would indicate extreme dissatisfaction, 400 indifference, and 700 extreme satisfaction.)*

Source: Blauner (1960) p 342.
These findings reflect not only differences in alienation, or in the
objective conditions of work for people in various jobs, but also occupa-
tional differences in the norms with respect to work attitudes (Caplow
1954). The professional is expected to be dedicated to his profession
and to have an intensive intrinsic interest in his area of specialized
competence: the white-collar employee is expected to be 'company-
oriented' and like his work. But for the manual worker, 'his loyalty is
never taken for granted and more than any other occupational type,
cultural norms permit him the privilege of "gripping"' (Blauner 1960
p 343). J. A. C. Brown makes the same point: 'The working classes, as
we have seen, are supposed to dislike work and therefore need
"discipline" (the time clock, for example), to keep them in order.'
(Brown 1954 p 99)

A number of factors contribute to occupational differences in alien-
ation. In the case of manual workers in occupations in which the
physical environment or the technological work process is particularly
challenging, control over it seems to alleviate experienced alienation
(Friedman and Havighurst 1954). Similarly, research by Brewer showed
some support for two propositions that highly complex organizational
tasks and dangerous, isolated tasks also lead to the debureaucratization
of authority relations (Brewer 1970). Blauner suggests that satisfaction
derived by professional and white-collar workers from control over their
social environment parallels the control over the technical environment
sought by manual workers, i.e. they seek to control clients and customers
in the same way that manual workers desire to control the technical
means of production. Blau illustrates this with regard to officials’ efforts
to exercise control over clients in a state employment agency and in a
federal law enforcement agency. Similarly, Gouldner found that the
gypsum miners had a lower level of work alienation than surface
workers (even though they had less status in the community than
surface workers) because the miners themselves were responsible for
deciding the pace at which the machines worked, where the machines
should operate, and what happened to them when they broke down.

5.2 Informal organization

Another important factor that can reduce alienation is the degree to
which an organization allows workers to organize informally. Coal
mining is a good example of an occupation where technological condi-
tions favour the development of integrated work groups. Technological
changes in mining which have had a disruptive effect on informal
organization – such as the change over from hand-got to long-wall
procedures – had an alienating effect on the miners (Trist and Bamforth 1951). One of the functions of groups that is relevant to alienation is the adoption by individuals of the group’s norms to define their own actions. Where such norms are internalized, the individual does not feel that his normatively channelled behaviour is a response to coercive dictates over which he has no control. Leonard Pearlin, in a study of nursing personnel, defined alienation as subjectively experienced powerlessness to control one’s own activities, and found that behaviour supported by group norms can create a sense of personal commitment and voluntarism (Pearlin 1962). Organizations and occupations vary in the extent to which they facilitate such processes. Some occupations would seem to rank higher than others in this respect in almost all circumstances; thus, professionals seem to be able to impose their own autonomous group norms on their work situation more easily than manual workers. But the degree of autonomy is also relative to the particular organizational context in which it exists. The basic process of steel making requires more small group operations than car-assembly-line plants (cf. Walker 1950). Even the individual factory, at a particular time, may vary enormously in this respect from otherwise similar factories. It may even vary internally from time to time, as Donald Roy shows in his description of a small work group in ‘Banana Time: Job Satisfaction and Informal Interaction’ (Roy 1973).

5.3 Managers

The same considerations apply to management groups in organizations. In industries experiencing rapid change and a constant need for innovation, the structure of organization may become more ‘organic’. That is, instead of a ‘mechanistic’ structure characterized by a highly specialized division of labour and a rigid hierarchy, jobs can lose some of their formal definition of methods, responsibilities and powers and the definitive or enduring demarcation of functions may become more difficult to prescribe. (Burns and Stalker 1961) The managers have to

3 Professor John Child who has carried out research similar to that of Burns and Stalker has expressed doubts about the prevalence of this trend:

Burns and Stalker only found one example of an organic structure, and that was confined to the R and D division of Ferranti’s. Some parts of companies in changing, science-based industries may adopt organic type systems, but my own research carried out over a much wider comparative base than Burns and Stalker’s shows that companies in electronics and pharmaceuticals are highly bureaucratic. Project teams, matrix systems, etc. seem generally to be set on top of this structure rather than instead of it. (Personal communication.)
engage in much more ‘lateral’ communication and informal ties are likely to increase as a result and so reduce alienation. Also, when each manager’s tasks have to be discharged more in the light of knowledge of the total situation, in a turbulent environment, then his feelings of powerlessness or purposelessness may not be so marked as in the former mechanistic system. But some firms have a deeply entrenched resistance to such developments, and are just as likely to respond to external turbulence and change by redefining roles in more precise and rigorous terms and reinforcing the formal structures, thus creating more alienation. Even where informal peer groups do develop among managers, they may create alienation by accentuating careerist competition and inducing the manager to see his colleagues as commodities, to be used to further his own career. In such groups, behind the superficial friendliness and co-operation there is distance, indifference and distrust.

5.4 Professional commitments and career interests

The new forms of power, or unobtrusive controls, discussed by Blau and Schoenherr (1973) include the harnessing of professional commitments and career interests to the service of the organization. Career interests are a valuable resource at the disposal of organizations. Robert Merton has noted that in order for a bureaucracy to operate successfully, it must attain a higher degree of reliability of behaviour, an unusual degree of conformity with prescribed patterns of action. To ensure this, it plans the bureaucrat’s life for him in terms of a graded career, and he is tacitly compelled to adapt his thoughts, feelings and action to the prospect of that career. Career success by organizational standards is measured by the alienated yardsticks of money, power and prestige, rather than spontaneous involvement in the work for its own intrinsic and fulfilling value.

There are at least two strategies open to the professional in a bureaucracy when faced with these organizational pressures. He can utilize conformity as a tool, for example, by following rules and regulations to the letter and so protect himself against interference. Michel Crozier’s study of French officials found that subordinates tacitly agreed to play the management game, but they tried to turn it to their own advantage and to prevent management from interfering with their independence. (Crozier 1964) Or, alternatively, the professional within a bureaucratic organization can seek to maintain wider professional norms of behaviour that foster autonomy and expectations of involvement in shaping the goals of the organization. In the case of the first strategy, as described by Crozier, there tends to be a high degree of dissatisfaction with the conditions of employment and little worker solidarity. In the second
strategy, different types of professionals are found to have somewhat different expectations and to experience alienation for subtly different reasons, although they can all be included under such general rubrics as desire for participation in goal setting and decision-making, and freedom to pursue autonomous professional goals. (Miller 1970, and Aiken and Hage 1970)

Conclusion

Although it is useful for the purpose of academic research to break down such broad concepts as ‘alienation’ and ‘bureaucracy’ into different dimensions and to test propositions about empirical correlations between them, in the manner suggested by Aiken and Hage, there are dangers. One danger is that such research may become purely academic because the issues begin to appear as matters of detail and requiring only minor adjustments. This may well suit the interest of some of those who sponsor research. They naturally welcome information which may help them to manipulate less essential aspects of the system so as to increase worker motivation or operating efficiency. The broader issues are then lost sight of and matters concerning different goals and values never come to the fore.

This brings us back to the point made earlier in discussing the interrelationship between social problems, which provide the context within which we discuss organizations and the theories and methodologies which guide our analysis. The single example of the use of the concept bureaucracy in the field of organization studies provides us with rich material for analysing these interrelationships. The quotations at the beginning of this chapter alerted us to the different problems and interests that have been associated with bureaucracy. The tendency of many organization theorists and researchers to associate the concept with problems of efficiency, as faced by managers, has given rise to a particular set of theories and empirical studies. A completely different set of theories and findings can emerge when a researcher on bureaucracy and alienation starts out with a different perspective and different associated problems in mind. This is illustrated in the introduction to a report of the participant observation study of the New York Telephone Company, by Elinor Langer:

I brought to the job certain radical interests. I knew I would see ‘bureaucratization’, ‘alienation’, and ‘exploitation’. I knew that it was ‘false consciousness’ of their true role in the imperialist economy
that led the 'workers' to embrace their oppressors. I believed those things and I believe them still. I know why, by my logic, the workers should rise up. But my understanding was making reality an increasing puzzle: Why didn't people move? What things, invisible to me, were holding them back? What I hoped to learn, in short, was something about the texture of the industrial system: what life within it meant to its participants. (Langer 1970 p1)

Her account of the functioning of that organization includes reference to many of the factors discussed by researchers with a quite different perspective, and they will constitute the main topics of this book: structure, system, control, interaction, roles, rules, knowledge and information. But what she found was affected by what she was looking for (problems), how she looked (theory and methodology), and what she hoped her findings would be used for (values).

This volume will present a variety of perspectives on organizations and it will be clear that the author of this chapter, like the authors of other chapters, has his own preferences. The reader is likewise free to make a choice. What our discussions can provide is help in making that choice as well informed as possible. And perhaps also instil the feeling that these are socially and intellectually relevant issues.