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Bureaucracy

“Bureaucracy is the art of making the possible impossible” – Javier Pascual Salcedo

“Bureaucracy destroys initiative. There is little that bureaucrats hate more than innovation, especially innovation that produces better results than the old routines. Improvements always make those at the top of the heap look inept. Who enjoys appearing inept?” – Frank Herbert, Heretics of Dune

“In any bureaucracy, the people devoted to the benefit of the bureaucracy itself always get in control, and those dedicated to the goals the bureaucracy is supposed to accomplish have less and less influence, and sometimes are eliminated entirely.” – Jerry Pournelle

“If an idea can survive a bureaucratic review and be implemented it wasn't worth doing” – Anonymous

“Whether the mask is labeled fascism, democracy, or dictatorship of the proletariat, our great adversary remains the apparatus—the bureaucracy, the police, the military. Not the one facing us across the frontier of the battle lines, which is not so much our enemy as our brothers' enemy, but the one that calls itself our protector and makes us its slaves. No matter what the circumstances, the worst betrayal will always be to subordinate ourselves to this apparatus and to trample underfoot, in its service, all human values in ourselves and in others.” – Simone Weil

“A democracy which makes or even effectively prepares for modern, scientific war must necessarily cease to be democratic. No country can be really well prepared for modern war unless it is governed by a tyrant, at the head of a highly trained and perfectly obedient bureaucracy.” – Aldous Huxley

Introduction

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Why does a researcher in the field of cognitive science and cognitive systems write a text about bureaucracy? Well, one of the main problems in cognitive systems research is that although we can develop robots and other systems that are able to solve particular problems intelligently, we consistently fail to develop robots that understand what they are doing. And not understanding what they are doing is a pretty good description of bureaucrats. Since the role of understanding is key to our field of science, I feel qualified to add a more cognitively founded analysis of the phenomenon of bureaucracy to existing accounts that tend to stem from the organizational or social sciences.

Not surprisingly this text concludes that bureaucracy is a pathological state of human organization, characterized by *intelligence without understanding*. Bureaucracy stems from the desperately embraced illusion, held by a particular subset of people, that human organizations can be approached as closed systems to be fully described in rational and formal terms. More specifically, this assumption is made by “superiors” who interpret the world either as filled with absolute truths or who believe that all knowledge outside the scope of their main competence is highly uncertain and therefore of little use. These “superiors” interpret any open world as too complex to handle – which it is true for them – and as such they consider complexity reduction the first priority of the organization. However they fail to acknowledge that this priority might be the result of their own limited or specialist understanding. As a result they do everything to bring the complexity of the organization down, even if this results in a mass destruction of the available competence and commitment.

It is this enforced attempt to complexity reduction that, if not curtailed, results in an organization in which co-workers are treated as and (effectively) reduced to robots devoid of understanding (replaced by procedure) and empathic involvement (replaced by blind obedience). In a bureaucracy the whole organization is treated more as a formal system (a computer program) than as an assembly of highly capable, willing, and autonomous individuals who contribute to the greater societal goal of the organization. This treatment is not only highly degrading towards the living, breathing, and feeling people who form the organization, but it is also deeply misguided, because we need pervasive understanding of the world at any part of the organization, otherwise the organization will degrade to mediocracy at best or a deeply corrupt and self-serving robotic zombie-entity at worst.

So the actual topic of this text is what happens if understanding, competence, and compassion are purged from an organization and the organization starts to consider itself as disconnected from the greater society from which it derives its existence. The result is, I argue, precisely the pattern that characterizes bureaucracy. This pattern will be contrasted to a non-bureaucratic approach that allows for the open character of human organizations and relies on autonomy, competence, and compassion, instead of rationality and imposed stultifying structure.

Structure

This text consists of two parts. The first part is a summary of the main text in the form of two tables. The first table presents a comparison of the properties, signs, symptoms, phenomena, and other characteristics that constitute the bureaucratic as well as the non-bureaucratic syndrome. The second table is a list of red flags, also compiled from the main text, that are indicative of encroaching bureaucracy.

The main text forms the justification of the summary tables. It starts with dictionary definitions of bureaucracy and authority and the concepts of authoritarianism and its opposite libertarianism that refers to either an underdeveloped or well-developed ability to deal with real-world complexity. From this, we progress towards an analysis of the role of understanding and lack thereof in human organizations. This leads to an outline of the quite predictable progression towards more and more bureaucracy and the eventual mediocracy devoid of compassion.

This vision of mediocracy is contrasted with a description of how non-bureaucratic organizations function and what their telltale properties are. This opposition is used to address the question how to fight encroaching bureaucracy, which is not at all difficult in the early stages. The treatise ends with a description of the known epistemological stages and their properties that are highly predictive of the leader-style and whether the leadership will lead to more or less bureaucracy. Ultimately, it is a moral question whether one wants to stimulate or oppose bureaucracy: whether one is in favor of stultification or growth. The answer depends on one's epistemological stage.

Tjeerd Andringa
Associate professor Sensory Cognition
ALICE Institute
University of Groningen.

Bureaucracy recapitulation

	Bureaucratic syndrome	Non-bureaucratic syndrome
Topic		
Key properties		
Organizational goals	Societal goals of the organization are only adhered in name, but neither understood nor clearly implemented	Development of a broadly shared vision about the societal <i>raison d'être</i> of the organization and the way to realize it
Overall strategy	Stimulating sameness and oneness through standardization and obedience	Continual skilled improvisation on the basis of a shared vision and well-chosen procedures
Competence	Ignoring, discouraging, and demoralizing competent "subordinates"	Relying on and fostering all proven and budding competencies in the organization
Autonomy	Subordinate autonomy is not an option. Obedience is more important than competence	Autonomy and competence development of subordinates expected
Content	Complete disregard of content while favoring form	Content is leading, form a means
Organizational development	Structures and procedures adapt to the lowest competence level	Everyone is expected to learn and grow towards autonomous roles in organization
Main conflicts		
Stability versus development	Stability and other forms of high predictability leading. This defines the organization	The workers in the organization are constantly developing their skills in order to improve all aspects of the societal role of the organization (i.e., quality and efficiency)
Form versus optimization	Obsessed with form and formalisms. Centralized optimization of standard responsibilities	Actively eliciting creative and decentralized optimization of organizational goals. Disregard of form when counter-productive
Standardization versus diversity	Obsession with standardization and curtailing diversity, at the cost of quality if quality entails diversity.	Concerned with the overall optimization of all work processes in context, of which both standardization and increasing diversity are options
Error versus learning	Obsessed with preventing errors and mistakes. The organization redefines itself to produce what it can, not what it should; "race to the bottom"	Error and correction after error part of continual creative optimization of work processes
Short versus long term	Exclusively short-term (form) oriented, no care for or understanding of mid of long term goals	Optimization on all time-scales and all dimensions of success
Structural properties		
Role of hierarchy	Hierarchy formalized and inflexible, based on assumed competence of superiors	Hierarchy task dependent, and therefore flexible and competence-based
Perception of authorities	Authorities never fundamentally questioned	Incompetent authorities not accepted, but coached or dismissed.
Locus of control	Formation of stable authoritarian cliques, who take control over the institutional change processes to prevent further complexity	Loosely and varyingly linked libertarians at control positions.

Measures of success	Performance measures redefined to what is delivered	Performance measure based on what should be delivered (given <i>raison d'être</i>)
Accountability	Suppression of all forms of accountability at the higher levels and prevention of errors and retribution in case of error at the lower levels	Accountability part of normal institutional learning and competence building.
Emotions		
Overall role	Rationality and “objectivity” leading. Emotions treated as irrelevant source of variation, to be suppressed	Central role of positive emotions (compassion, enthusiasm, interest) as key motivators; pervasive negative emotions indicative of organizational failure
Emotion of workers	Motivating emotion negative: activities guided by the fear of losing control	Motivating emotion positive: activities aimed at realizing shared benefits
Emotions of co-workers	Utter disregard of the feelings and emotional wellbeing of co-workers	Strong focus on the creation of optimal working condition in which coworkers feel optimally motivated to give their best

Red flags

	Red Flags
Vision	The absence of a shared, living vision about the organization’s goals in a larger societal context
Leaders	Leaders insensitive to reasoned arguments by competent individuals at any position in the organization
	Leaders only sensitive to arguments related to goal achievement or procedure: realizable goals are preferred over desirable goals
	Leaders preferring obedience over autonomy and who curtail work-floor autonomy
Competences	Neglect of work-floor competences
	Demotivation of highly autonomous, competent and committed co-workers
	Gradual deterioration of quality of the working environment, the most competent and committed co-workers leaving
	Standardization at the cost of curtailing of essential/useful diversity
Uniformization	Strong focus on formalities while neglecting (or indefinitely) postponing content
	Compartmentalization of information and plans
	Mediocracy

CHARACTERISTICS OF BUREAUCRACY & LEGITIMATE BASES OF AUTHORITY ACCORDING TP MAX WEBER

Bureaucracy

1. Rules and procedures
2. Specialization and division of labor
3. Hierarchy of authority
4. Technically qualified personnel
5. Separate position and incumbent
6. Written communications and records

Legitimate Based of Authority

1. Rational–legal → Bureaucracy is based on rational-legal authority
2. Traditional
3. Charismatic

Bureaucracy

The New Oxford Dictionary defines bureaucrat as:

- An official in a government department, in particular one perceived as being concerned with procedural correctness at the expense of people's needs.

It defines bureaucracy as:

- A system of government in which most of the important decisions are made by officials rather than by elected representatives;
- a state or organization governed or managed according to such a system;
- the officials in such a system, considered as a group or hierarchy;
- excessively complicated administrative procedure, seen as characteristic of such a system.

The dictionary definitions already point out some key features. Bureaucracies:

- are concerned with procedural correctness of excessively complex procedures
- at the expense of addressing people's needs,
- they take over decisions from the places where they should be taken, and
- it is a group or hierarchical phenomenon.

Of course not all administrative structures are bureaucratic, and not all bureaucracies are in administration. And most ways in which people (and even bureaucrats) interact are not at all bureaucratic. In fact in situations without leaders, such as with friendships, even bureaucrats are not bureaucratic. It therefore makes sense to expect a particular kind of leadership as culprit. So the question is what makes some group of cooperating people bureaucratic? Or put differently, what type of cognitive phenomena explain this particular pattern of behavior? A suitable starting point is the strong, and disturbing, tendency of bureaucracies to take over authority from the places where it should reside.

Authority - the capacity to control environments.

The New Oxford Dictionary defines 'authority' as

“the power or right to give orders, make decisions, and enforce obedience; a person or organization having power or control in a particular, typically political or administrative, sphere; the power to influence others, esp. because of one's commanding manner or one's recognized knowledge about something”

It will be clear that a bureaucracy touches on many of these points.

One way to understand the concept and role of authority is from creation myths. Especially in Western creation myths, the pre-creation state was either chaos or some unspecified void or nothingness. From this, an omnipotent being created the order in

which lesser beings such as humans function. This Creator is the *ultimate authority* who not only created the living world, but who is also responsible to sustain and control the conditions in which humans flourish or wither. No wonder kings and emperors claim to derive their powers directly from a deity; and no wonder that those who have no idea how to self-maintain the conditions in which they function well believe it.

This defines a number of key properties of authority:

- authority masters both order and disorder better than the subordinates;
- the authority controls and sustains the *environment* in which subordinates exists;
- subordinates go to authorities for guidance and to solve problems they cannot solve themselves;
- whenever a subordinate learns to take control over more and more of its environment, its dependence on authorities decreases and it claims more and more authority over its own situation.

These properties are keys to the concept of authority (and bureaucracy). It entails that whenever individuals do not know how to self-maintain proper living conditions, they rely on “authority” to keep living condition within manageable bounds. This need for authority scales inversely with the scope of inadequacy: the more pervasive the inadequacy, the greater the need for authority. Conversely, the better individuals cope with and maintain their own living environment the less they need authorities.

Within the domain of political psychology the first group is known as *authoritarians* and the second as *libertarians* (Stenner, 2005; 2009a; 2009b). Authoritarians prefer (centralized) group authority and uniformity, while libertarians prefer (decentralized) individual authority and diversity. The predictability of authoritarian behavior has been studied in detail in “*The Authoritarian Dynamic*” (Stenner, 2005). Authoritarianism is characterized by a strong tendency of authoritarians to maximize oneness (via central control) and sameness (via common standards), especially in conditions where the things that make us one and the same—common authority, and shared values—appear to be under threat.

What follows is based on the scientific basis that culminated in Stenner’s work on political psychology, but here interpreted initially more generally – as coping with the ‘living environment’ – and later interpreted more narrowly – as coping with the ‘work environment’.

For authoritarians, the need for authority is not an option: it is an existential need. Whether they hate or love their authorities is irrelevant: they depend essentially on authorities and obey their commands because the alternative — no one to maintain living conditions — is too horrible to contemplate. This entails also that authoritarians hate the *idea* that their authorities are untrustworthy or incompetent, which Stenner refers to as threats to the normative order, because this is experienced as an existential threat. Being structurally depending on others (i.e., authorities) is already suboptimal, and being dependent on authorities that are incompetent, don’t care about their wellbeing, or even abuse this dependence is highly unsettling. In fact, thoughts in this direction are avoided because it makes authoritarians feel even more inadequate than normal. This makes

authoritarians about the worst possible judges of the authorities they depend on and align with. And it stabilizes bureaucratic organizations.

While authoritarians feel a pervasive (and generally subconscious) inadequacy to self-maintain proper living conditions, libertarians are blissfully unaware of any problem. They feel – justified or not – in control of their environment. This also entails that when the situation deteriorates, libertarians find it normal to (re)take matters in their own hands. Authoritarians in the same situation will turn to their authorities for solutions which is less likely to yield results. Libertarians might also be taxed beyond their coping capacity and from that moment they are more likely to adopt or accept authoritarian strategies. The reverse holds for authoritarians: when they experience a prolonged sense of control over their own situation they behave more libertarian. Crises and times of prosperity differ therefore in the prevalence of authoritarians and libertarian personalities.

In what follows, bureaucracy is the authoritarian way to organize a professional environment. Organizations that are controlled by people in a libertarian mode, who by definition are able to self-maintain proper or even nearly optimal working conditions, will not be bureaucratic because they will keep the whole organization focused on its societal goals. However organizations controlled by authoritarians will gradually ignore the stated goals and replace them with more and more activities that serve another goal: namely minimization of feelings of (existential) inadequacy at every level of the organization.

To understand the dynamics of bureaucracy one needs to understand the roots of the concepts ‘authoritarian’ and ‘libertarian’.

Authoritarians vs libertarians

Princeton researcher Karen Stenner (Stenner, 2005) used the following 5 two-option questions about child rearing values to determine the degree of authoritarianism.

Table 1: Child rearing qualities used to determine authoritarianism.

Authoritarians	Libertarians
Children should:	Children should:
should obey parents	be responsible for their actions
have good manners	have good sense and sound judgment
be neat and clean	be interested in how and why things happen
have respect for elders	think for themselves
follow the rules	follow their own conscience

The difference between the answers that authoritarians and libertarians choose is qualitative: authoritarians teach children *to behave in certain proscribed ways* and to obey authorities (elders, parents), libertarians teach children *how to understand the world and how to act responsibly*. The difference between authoritarians and libertarians is therefore neither ideological nor political: it depends exclusively on of the depth and

pervasiveness of understanding of the living environment: not of conveniently isolated parts, but of the whole environment in all of its diverse complexity.

Authoritarians and libertarians may experience and interpret a shared world quite differently. If authoritarians experience the world as too complex the highest priority is to eliminate all sources of diversity to bring complexity down to manageable levels. And this, and only this, is the reason why bureaucrats take control over decision processes. It is not because they think they can do it better, but because of a strong unconscious urge to establish a measure of control over their world. And because they do not know how to do that independently, they turn to their authorities for ideologies, interpretations, and marching orders.

A problem here is that their limited understanding, in combination with the deeply unconscious nature of the root problem, precludes a proper assessment of the true sources of diversity and complexity that boggle their minds; they need their authorities to tell them why they feel inadequate, what the sources of their problems are, and how to cope with these¹. Which of course provides authorities ample room for manipulation. This is another example of the fact that authoritarians are the worst possible judges of their leaders. It is also a reason why so many “revolutions” realize the opposite of what they (c)aim to realize.

For libertarians the complexity of the world is well below daily coping capacity and where authoritarians see problems they see opportunities. This is actually problematic because realizing these opportunities is bound to lead to a further social complexification that might aggravate authoritarians even further. Libertarians are therefore, quite unwittingly, major sources of feelings of inadequacy in authoritarians.

And this leads to a one-sided resentment toward anything beyond coping capacity that authoritarians share with other authoritarians and of which libertarians are typically completely unaware. In fact encroaching bureaucracy can be interpreted as a (low-intensity) war between two ways of facing reality. While libertarians are unaware of any war being fought (especially because they do not understand the need for it), they can be blamed for co-creating a complex world surpassing authoritarian coping capabilities. Authoritarians, with their limited understanding, share a deep anxiety and are highly motivated to do something about it. This subconscious attitude towards the world makes them highly motivated to oppose all sources of complexity, unpredictability, novelty, and growth that complexify, confuse, and destabilize any ordered state of affairs.

Authoritarians do have an alternative strategy to deal with complexity: they can be educated their way out of dependence. This is a perfectly feasible strategy, but it is not a strategy that they will come up with among themselves (libertarians choose this strategy naturally). In practice it works only when their superiors and colleagues double as mentors who help to deepen and (especially) broaden their understanding of the world, allow them to experiment and make mistakes to learn from, coach them to see opportunities where they originally saw problems, and allow them more and more control

¹ Advertising performs this function as well

over their living and working environment. This is the simple solution to prevent and counteract bureaucracy.

On the other hand, authoritarian superiors who feel threatened by subordinate independence will curtail any subordinate creativity and budding understanding. Selecting this kind of leaders in an organization is a sure (and time honored) strategy to foster bureaucracy.

Authoritarian - libertarian interactions

Most research on authoritarianism has been aimed at the more extreme authoritarian and libertarian personalities. However it make sense that most people shift in and out of authoritarian and libertarian modes-of-being as function of whether the demands and the environmental complexity and diversity exceeds coping capacity and real-time understanding.

This leads to motivational differences: authoritarians, especially the ones with the shallowest understanding, are highly motivated to change the situation into one that is sufficiently purged of perceived sources of complexity; in society typically people who look different (ethnicity) or adhere to different norms (religious minorities, sexual orientation, and libertarians). Initially libertarians fail to see a complexity induced need for change and often allow authoritarian tendencies a free rein because they can deal with some additional curtailment (or additional complexity for that matter). While authoritarians are motivated and unified in their yearning for a less complex world, the libertarians enjoy their freedoms and add further complexity and diversity in the system in their efforts to realize their individual potential and enjoy their freedoms. Which of course bolsters the authoritarian determination to oppose this progressing ‘moral decline’.

Libertarians only start to become upset when authoritarian curtailment of complexity effectively constrains their freedom. Initially they use their more pervasive understanding to reach goals in spite of an increasing self-serving environment. This of course increases complexity and diversity, with the stereotypical authoritarian response to further increase curtailment and uniformity. Typically only at a (too?) late stage they confront the red tape, incompetency, and self-serving character of the organization they have allowed or even helped to develop. This window of opportunity is an important reason why unnecessary bureaucracy can develop and become institutionalized.

Intelligence versus understanding

Intelligence is unrelated to the difference between authoritarians and libertarians. In Stenner’s words: “*authoritarians are not endeavoring to avoid complex thinking so much as a complex world*” (Stenner, 2009a). Authoritarians are just as intelligent as libertarians, and might value intelligence even higher than libertarians do. This is not because libertarians value intelligence and rationality less, but because they value

understanding and creativity even more.

The authoritarian preference for intelligence is unsurprising because intelligence as measured by an IQ-test reflects one's ability to produce expected and desired answers in response to problems formulated by others. IQ measures therefore *intellectual compliance* and conformity, which are typical authoritarian values. So it is to be expected that authoritarians judge a high IQ — as intellectual compliance — as highly desirable. However in complex times of change and uncertainty authoritarians judge *behavioral compliance* — obedience, even if it defies logic — as even more desirable.

Where intelligence leads to particular context-deprived standard solutions, understanding leads to situationally adapted, context-aware, unique solutions that are always in flux because they are in continual pursuit of optimality. With mere intelligence one can improve a bad situation to a standard situation (which may or may not be optimal), but mere intelligence is equally able to reduce excellence to the same standard situation. With understanding and situational optimization, it is possible to track optimality because it allows for a continual, broadly shared, autonomous optimization process. Without understanding, one cannot see nor evaluate, nor appreciate the opportunities for long-term optimization, which entails that the creative diversity necessary to remain excellent is interpreted as unnecessary and unwanted complexity.

Intelligence without understanding

Authoritarians live, conform Table 1, in a world of which they understand many aspects only shallowly: they know the rules, protocols, and norms of normal behavior, they adhere to ideologies and religions, they know many examples of how to respond to particular situations, and know what to say and who to obey. But they have no pervasive understanding of why and how things happen and how the world is interconnected. In addition they are definitely unable to think and decide for themselves, follow their own conscience, and accept the responsibility for their own actions. Authoritarians obey their authorities and these are therefore responsible for their actions. This also entails that authoritarians cannot oversee the long- (or even mid-)term consequences of their own and other's behavior and they offload the responsibility for that to their authorities. And if these have no idea about the long-term consequences or even if they have opposing goals than their stated goals, the authoritarian neither cares nor understands.

Our current educational system, which favors IQ and specialization over pervasive understanding, is conducive for the development of authoritarians. In fact it seems that Einstein was referring to the authoritarian disposition when he described the goals of education:

The development of general ability for independent thinking and judgment should always be placed foremost, not the acquisition of special knowledge. Otherwise he – with his specialized knowledge – more closely resembles a well-trained dog than a harmoniously developed person.

Albert Einstein (1954)

The well-trained dog resemblance is a direct reference to intelligence — as intellectual compliance — resulting from specialist education without the benefits of the pervasive understanding that allows for independent thinking and judgment. The well-trained dog comparison is an effective analogy of authoritarians who exhibit desired behavior while neither understanding the larger context nor the consequences of their compliance. On top of that it is also the ideal personality type for the organizational ideal they envision.

Rationality and reality

Rationality – the ability to think clearly, sensibly, and logically – is a valuable, but ultimately a limited ability: rational and logically sound thinking is only possible in a closed domain consisting of concepts that can be manipulated with logical operators. The key problem with rationality is that it is perfectly possible to be rational in knowledge domains devoid of factual reality. Bureaucracies have many ways to create phony realities that arise from many generations of documented and gradually more formalized accounts (i.e., redefined towards reduced complexity) of the impact of the real world on the bureaucracy.

The formal response of the bureaucracy, for example the way it assigns funds and other forms of support to some activities while discontinuing other activities, is a very strong incentive to behave according to whatever the bureaucratic decision processes favor. This then leads rapidly to a bureaucratic “reality” in which behavior in compliance with the bureaucratic goals – whatever these are – is favored over behavior that actually realizes the societal goals of the organization. The rational thing to do is to behave according to the bureaucratic reality: and rationality is just as suitable for that, as it is for any other closed domain reasoning.

What the libertarian mode of being brings to organizations is a sense of reality; a structural grounding in the larger societal context that ultimately provides the *raison d'être* of the organization. Without dominant libertarian influences, an organization loses track of its goals and turns into a – rationally and intelligently managed – activity that becomes increasingly self-serving: the internal dynamic, based on formal procedure, has become more important than the societal function of the organization.

The driving forces of bureaucracy

Where intelligence and rationality are mainly concerned with local/specialized solutions and static and specific end-states (such as in an IQ-test), understanding and creativity are concerned with pervasive holistic optimization via novel and situationally appropriate approaches. These often non-standard and diverse solutions are typically well outside the scope of understanding and coping capacity of the true authoritarian and therefore highly suspect. This is the reason why authoritarian superiors hate (more) competent subordinates and generally do everything to curtail them. This underlies the gradual purging of competence in an encroaching bureaucracy.

The ‘intelligent ignoramus’ —literally intelligent individuals who are ignorant— at key positions in an organization are the main driving forces of bureaucracy. This can be a functionary who is promoted to the level of incompetence (Peter’s Principle). But it can also be technocrats as the prototypical example of highly intelligent authoritarian *specialist* who lacks the benefits of pervasive understanding. For all domains in which technocrats are not competent they rely on shallow ideologies, sloganeering, minimal understanding of past events, caricatures and suspicion of complex phenomena, and especially on the wishes of the people or structures that have promoted them to their control positions. These technocrats are Einstein’s well-trained dogs that optimize, in all sincerity and without malice, a few aspect of the functioning of a complex organization, while destroying all other facets and peculiarities characteristic of the healthy organization that optimizes its organizational goals.

Especially in times of perceived threat and adversity, technocrats are, as all authoritarians, deeply anxious and deeply suspicious of any future situation that cannot be predicted or understood with their limited understanding. If pushed beyond their scope of understanding they have one, and only one, goal: the reduction of the complexity of the working (or living) environment to a (for them) manageable level. This goal can be reached via a range of strategies but is characteristically implemented through adherence to formal structures and the reduction of diversity in any way possible and as long as it does not require more than shallow understanding.

The spread of bureaucracy

This entails that technocrats focus on formal structures such as bodies of rules and regulations, detailed protocols (for standard situations), and shallowly interpreted best practices. True work floor competence and proven organizational excellence are an annoying obstacle in the simplification and uniformization of the organization (a process often referred to as “harmonization”, a characteristic authoritarian reinterpretation of the meaning of the word ‘harmony’).

And because the authoritarian fear of a complex world is existential, the technocrat in charge is quite ruthless in simplifying the working environment: it is even seen as a good thing, because if (s)he with his/her intelligence and proven (specialist) competence does not understand his working environment, who can? Of course many do, but their attempts to communicate and convince the authoritarian leader are interpreted as subversive resistance against the good cause of simplification. Which justifies the activation of the bureaucratic bag-of-tricks for psychological warfare in which the now “harmonized” chain-of-command is used to crush subordinate dissent (and competence).

These tricks include promoting compliant friends (“team-players”) at key-positions and sidetracking competent others. Key information is increasingly kept among an authoritarian inner-circle and used to gain advantage over independent thinkers (who at this stage typically do not yet know they are under some sort of a coordinated attack). Promotions are easier made within the inner-circle, which entails a gradual, but quite effective spread of authoritarians at key-positions. In addition impossible deadlines are

set and mind-numbing tasks are given to the competent resistance, and extensions of deadlines and other favors are only granted after acknowledging the power of the new bureaucratic realities.

This result inevitably in a fearful and demoralized formal organization that is devoid of its original shared purpose and enthusiasm and which relies more and more on shallow cognition: existing and potential subordinate competences are no longer appreciated and the organizational goals are sacrificed for the benefit of the perpetuation of incompetence. This of course increases the need for authority. And even when the authorities do a bad job, the incompetent and demoralized have no choice in accepting its rule, so the resulting cesspool of self-serving incompetence is surprisingly stable. It is also devoid of enthusiasm, passion, growth, and commitment.

There are strong parallels with the time-honored practice of slavery. Enslavement is not in the first place determined by physical constraints, it is primarily a state of mind in which one is incompetent to manage one's living/working conditions. This entails that masters/superiors that value the stability of their relation to slaves/subordinates should prevent the development of a deeper and more pervasive understanding and with that the erosion of the need for authority. It will be clear that encroaching bureaucracy follows the dynamics of slavery, although unacknowledged because the bureaucrats in charge generally miss the understanding of what they are doing. And if they do, they do not really care because *they* do not see an alternative.

Mediocracy

Mediocracy - a dominant class consisting of mediocre people, or a system in which mediocrity is rewarded (New Oxford Dictionary)

The authoritarian need for structure and authority fosters hierarchy. Authoritarians crave a clear chain of command in which, without any need for justification, it is assumed that the higher levels of the hierarchy are sufficiently competent. This assumption does not need to be backed-up by facts or even to be partly true because the assumption of authority competence is an existential necessity for the authoritarian (as outlined above). The true authoritarian only needs an illusion of competent authority figures and this is another reason why bureaucracies become self-serving: as actual competences are suppressed (e.g., because the truly competent coworkers search for more rewarding opportunities elsewhere) it becomes essential to keep up appearances. In practice this eventually entails the disappearance of any form of accountability in the higher levels. It illustrates why it is so important to speak truth to power: without this critical function there is no way to stop encroaching bureaucracy/authoritarianism.

At the same time the higher levels in the hierarchy become increasingly intolerant of errors, because it reflects badly on the organization (i.e., the higher levels). All in all this entails that a once healthy organization becomes obsessed with preventing errors and changes from an organization that pursued its original function as well as possible into an organization that does not want to make (publicly known) mistakes. The typical

instruments are *Service Level Agreements* that cover all standard services (that can be executed with minimal understanding) but that not even try to address non-default services (that require more understanding and commitment). In addition it is usually agreed that customer satisfaction of these services should at least be 7.5 out of 10 or so. Effectively this entails that service quality will improve if customer satisfaction is below this threshold and decreases if it surpasses it sufficiently. This is an example of mediocracy.

The organization in this state has now abolished even the pretense of excellence. However the remaining libertarians that *do* value the original goals of the organization will be forced to compensate for the mediocratic we-can-and-will-do-it-if-it-is-standard-and-does-not-require-understanding attitude for everything that is really important to optimize. Of course libertarians can do this to some degree, but it leads to all kinds of parallel and unofficial structures where the required quality is realized despite the formal organization.

This holds in general: inevitable the rigidity and self-serving properties of the formal hierarchy lead to informal parallel structures to either realize above-average quality or to hide below-average performance. However these parallel structures are murky and easily corrupted. At best these result in a situation in which the functional hierarchy is quite different from the formal hierarchy. At worst it leads to a factual, never acknowledged, disintegration of the formal hierarchy into highly corrupt factions that use the formal hierarchy as a cover for and cover-up of self-serving activities. For example drug-running or black-mailing schemes by security forces, accepting or demanding bribes for favors and information by civil-servants, or sexual abuses among the clergy. These are all sure signs of institutionalized authoritarianism and the associated self-serving nature of bureaucracy.

Libertarian organizations

Interestingly, libertarian organizations have similar unofficial structures as late-state authoritarian bureaucracies (without the corruption). This is not because of a formal choice, but simply because the idea that a formal structure can cover all necessary eventualities was an illusion in the first place: functional structures that contribute to real-world requirements need flexible access to the available competence and enthusiasm, without being bogged-down and interfered with by bureaucratic structures of mediocre competence that offer no discernible contribution towards meeting real-world needs.

Unlike authoritarian organizations that unsuccessfully try to reduce the complexity of the world to match the institutional understanding of it, libertarian organizations match the available competences and institutional understanding to whatever the world (justifiably so) demands of the organization. Where authoritarian organizations realize stasis and mediocracy, libertarian organizations realize personal growth, institutional excellence, and with that effective contributions to the wider society.

In non-bureaucratic organizations the formal hierarchy is as important as in a

bureaucracy, but its role is quite different: it has to manage autonomy instead of enforcing compliance. However this is, for superiors in a libertarian mode, not at all demanding because the very autonomy and commitment of a healthy libertarian organization ensures that it can deal with stability (where efficiency and organizational optimization are priorities) and change (where protection of quality and the realization of opportunities are prominent).

Properties of non-bureaucratic organizations

- A “lived” vision of the goals and roles of the organization is widely shared. It allows everyone in the organization to contribute to its realization via well-formulated procedures and competent improvisation alike.
- Focus on pervasive competence development; stimulate overlapping competences to ensure organizational redundancy, optimization opportunities, and more timely services.
- Distribute responsibilities according to available competences, interests, ambitions, and enthusiasm.
- Let co-workers organize their own work and make sure they have ample opportunities to volunteer for activities.
- Be alert of indications of low competence, stagnated development, insensitivity to adverse consequences of (in)action, low inherent motivation, low commitment to the organization and the services it should provide (e.g., 9-to-5 mentality), and as early indicator lack of enthusiasm.
- Approach the organization holistically: optimize everything in context of the whole; prevent at all cost strict compartmentalization of responsibilities and information, because specialism and other forms of close-mindedness are seeds of stagnation and corruption.
- Allow for ample opportunities for unstructured information sharing. The Scottish proverb “When the heart is full the tongue will speak” will ensure that really important information will be shared.
- Put real responsibility in *every* job description and allow a diversification or responsibilities as competence grows. Stimulate expertise, but prevent specialization.
- Allow people to be enthusiastic about what they have done well and allow them to learn from mistakes.
- Continually match organizational goals and individual growth.

In healthy libertarian organizations everyone develops in terms of understanding. This entails that eventually many can “play” a diversity of formal and functional roles. Basically the only real requirement for a healthy libertarian organization is that everyone in the organization is at a position that does not exceed their understanding capacity: their epistemological development.

Epistemological development

Epistemological development (van Rossum & Hamer, 2010) is a highly predictable, although barely understood, process in which the first two stages, absolutism and multiplism are characteristic for authoritarians:

Absolutism

This is a worldview marked by dualism and certainty: knowledge is black or white, right or wrong, highly certain, composed of discrete facts, and handed down from authorities unquestioningly.

Reasoned arguments to convince an absolutist leader are pointless, (s)he just follows authorities. You need to become an authority in the eyes of the absolutist to impose your views. And as long as you are the authority, you will have their devoted support.

Multiplism

This is a worldview characterized by the idea that one opinion is equally valid as any other, that knowledge is highly uncertain, and that there is no agreed-upon means for justification. And because of this there is no reason for a leader to take other opinions into account on the basis of their quality.

However the multiplist leader is sensitive to arguments related to goal achievement: feasibility is more important than the desirability since the multiplist leader wants to uphold the illusion of competence, especially in the own eyes.

The further stages, that are probably only reached by a minority of university graduates, start with a position sometimes referred to as evaluativism and are characteristic for libertarians (and academics).

Evaluativism

Marked by a growing realization that there are means of justification of various positions and that this enables an individual to assert some positions with confidence even if knowledge is evolving and contingent.

The evaluativist leader is able to deal with uncertainty and balances arguments of varying quality, but generally only within a limited scope.

Advanced understanding

Is characterized by the ability to evaluate a range of expertise and qualitatively different arguments, reconcile theory and evidence, provide support for a diversity of claims, and re-evaluate those claims in the light of new evidence.

Leaders in these stages are able to reconcile the available resources with the organizational goals, while taking the full societal context into account.

Organizations that prefer excellence to mediocracy should be highly sensitive for signs of absolutist and multiplist leaders. All leaders in a hierarchy should understand the Peter Principle (employees tend to be promoted to their level of incompetence). Insufficiently competent leaders can function when tightly controlled by libertarian superiors, but this is dangerous since the libertarian superiors expect subordinate autonomy without the need of tight control. Fortunately, leaders with advanced levels of understanding will generally have no difficulty in shaping and maintaining a non-bureaucratic organization.

Opposing encroaching bureaucracy

Opposing encroaching bureaucracy in its early phases is especially simple when no one really wants more bureaucracy: simply score the current state of affairs and current plans of the organization in terms of their effect of purging competence (e.g., with the list at the beginning of this text) and start an open discussion based on arguments.

If a part of the leadership is absolutist or multiplist and simply refuses to accept any non-bureaucratic alternatives it is more difficult because arguments do not work, which is counterintuitive for libertarians and is likely to lead to a waste of their efforts. In this case a sufficient group of libertarians need to organize themselves to quickly organize more pressure on the absolutist or multiplist leadership in the form of naked power. The strategy is basically simple: offer two approaches; the carrot and the stick. The carrot involves a work floor derived face saving solution for the problems the leadership has, on conditions that do not enhance (or actually reduce) bureaucracy, while making clear this is 1) not negotiable and 2) already in progress. The stick involves refraining from taking any responsibility for any plans towards more bureaucracy through a combination of 1) actively boycotting the bureaucratic process and 2) making leadership failure as public as possible. The prospect of immanent public failure is highly motivating for authoritarians and it will be clear who the real authorities are in this situation (namely those who define the environment of the leaders).

However absolutist and multiplist leaders are no idiots, they are just as intelligent, and have many institutional tools at their disposal to demoralize their opposition. The most prevalent of these is probably the simplest: structurally ignoring, non-addressing, and ridiculing of the issues of those opposing bureaucratic tendencies. That the opposition is fighting to prevent or repair a pathologic organization is not understood and therefore irrelevant. The complexity reduction these leaders crave, justifies pretty much any strategy. This entails that the libertarian opposition should act firmly and timely. They should realize that real authority shows itself as control over the environment (pretty much the only concept authoritarians grasp better than libertarians). So controlling the environment of the leaders is a key strategy. Put in more positive terms (that libertarians *do* understand): it is all about co-creating an environment in which every key process can flourish: even the leaders.

Opposing bureaucracy in its advanced stages is almost impossible from within the organization, because hardly anyone has any real competence and autonomy left. The result of any work-floor opposition in this stage yields generally not less bureaucracy, but a reorganization of inadequacy with little benefit for the public. In this case the organization needs highly competent libertarian leadership that is well versed in the power play of highly intelligent and highly motivated apparatchiks. Fortunately, even in this situation bureaucracies can make a fairly quick turnaround because the gradual development of opportunities to (re)express and (re)develop individualism, autonomy, and competence are highly appreciated by many in even the most stultified and corrupt bureaucracies (as third world anti-corruption policies have demonstrated). However this should be a gradual process.

Ethical wrap-up

Bureaucracy, as interpreted here, is a pathological state of human organization that opposes some of the most central tendencies in human individuals: namely to growth, towards autonomy, and to the co-creation of a high quality living environment. Given the consequences, not opposing encroaching bureaucracy might be interpreted as highly unethical.

From an ethical point of view, educational organizations, and maybe even each individual educational program, should make a well-advertised choice whether they aim to produce the highly intelligent specialists – devoid of pervasive understanding – that Einstein compared to well-trained dogs. This will foster bureaucracy. Alternatively they may aim to educate harmoniously developed personalities, which requires a careful consideration of the development of the individual student and is, as such, a safeguard against bureaucracy.

Although bureaucracy is per definition focused on the working environment (in a broad sense), a society-wide degrading of understanding and competence is of course also facilitated if people are actively limited in their ability to contribute autonomously to the co-creation of their society. As such it is a serious danger facing democratic societies and it may lead even to society-wide bureaucracies that are only democratic in name because real democratic competences have been purged from society. In these societies citizens only participate in the façade of democracy and not in the population-wide co-construction process that democracy is supposed to be.

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