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The Discrete Charm of Bureaucracy

A Lacanian Theory of the Bureaucratic Mechanism

In modern politics, bureaucracy plays the role of the proverbial necessary evil. You can't have democracy and rule of law without it; yet, its mere presence and growing importance is perceived as a menace to genuine democracy. Bureaucracy is thus the *pharmakon* of democracy: its remedy, but also its poison, depending merely on the dosage.

This paradoxical nature of bureaucracy has been with us since its classical Weberian definition. On the one hand, Weber argues, the benefic, rationalizing effects of bureaucracy make it a necessary agency for the modern state: "The great modern state is absolutely dependent upon a bureaucratic basis... The more complicated and specialized modern culture becomes, the more its external supporting apparatus demands the personally detached and strictly 'objective' expert"¹. On the other hand, this ingenious tool for the rationalization and efficientization of social life always bears the risk of getting out of our hands, becoming autonomous and indestructible: "Where the bureaucratization of administration has been completely carried through, a form of power relation is established that is practically unshatterable"². Weber sums up this paradox with the following admission: "Democracy as such is opposed to the rule of bureaucracy, in spite and perhaps because of its unavoidable yet unintended promotion of bureaucratization"³.

Unavoidable, yet unintended: armies of social, political and legal scholars have tried, following Weber, to untangle this paradox by separating the good side of bureaucracy (the

¹ H. H. Gerth, C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber. Essays in Sociology*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1958, pp. 211, 216.

² *Ibid.*, p. 228.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

unavoidable) from the bad one (the unintended). A recurrent kind of approach to bureaucracy became the rule, in which the pair of questions ‘how much bureaucracy is required for democracy’ and ‘how much bureaucracy is just too much’ all tried to locate that magical point in which variations in quantity determine changes in quality. But in spite of its noble efforts, this search for the golden measure and its oscillation between the two sides of the bureaucratic phenomenon failed to explain precisely that critical point around which they were floating and which they were thus trying to exorcise: that original paradox of bureaucracy, its rational and irrational nature.

This is the original paradox that the present research attempted to elucidate. In so doing, I tried to go around this classical Weberian account of bureaucracy and its contemporary offsprings, in order to throw thus a different light on the problem that these theories left in place. By means of the philosophical triad Hegel, Marx and Lacan, the Weberian paradox is thus approached, as it were, from its two external sides: from the side of its assumptions and presuppositions, and from the side of its necessary consequences. What exactly does it mean that bureaucracy is the rationalizer of the modern society, and what exactly does this entail?

The first chapter is concerned with the first major articulation of the decisive role that bureaucracy plays in the modern state: Hegel’s theory of the state. In the *Philosophy of Right*, the civil service is defined as the universal class, in charge with the harmonization of the social edifice and with the mediation between the particularism of the civil society and the universalism of the state. The crucial role played by this universal class of knowledge bears some notable consequences on its designated system of checks and balances: on its upper side, the monarch is reduced to a pure signifying function, whose task is to accompany the network of expert decisions with his formal ‘I will’. On the lower side, the civil service’s attempt to unify and universalize the particularist dispersion of civil society does not prevent the appearance of certain social contradictions – contradictions which seem to jeopardize Hegel’s design of the rational state. The concluding part of the chapter revolves around a comparative reading of Hegel’s account of the civil service and the critique that Marx formulates in his 1843 manuscripts. The results of this comparative reading are summed up in the final part of the chapter, in which the hidden similarities, familiarities but also oppositions between Hegel’s notion of universal class (the civil service) and Marx’s (the proletariat) are brought into daylight: while obviously being inscribed in two radically different logics (a reformist and a revolutionary one), their similar status as the materialized self-consciousness of society, meant to transcend and erase its

divisions, bears, in both logics, a similar danger of turning them into a rigid and autonomous mediator, society's self-consciousness which is nevertheless disjoined from it and externalized, following only its own blind mechanism.

The second chapter is structured on an opposition between two Marxist currents of thought: traditional Marxism, which defines capitalism as class domination and sees its fundamental contradiction as lying between the spheres of production and distribution; and critical Marxism, which defines capitalism as a domination of abstract social structures and locates its fundamental contradiction in the social and yet objective dynamics of value. The advantage, from the standpoint of a possible theory of bureaucracy, of traditional Marxism is undeniable: this trend of thought actually places bureaucracy at the very intersection between production and distribution, thus as a social mediator – similar, in this respect, to Hegel's civil service – between the unruly sphere of economic production and the socially and politically conscious sphere of just distribution. But the failures of traditional Marxism – perceivable both from the historical point of view of 'really existing socialism' and from the theoretical point of view of critical Marxism – force us to abandon also its theory of bureaucracy: the flaws in the traditional Marxist theory of bureaucracy are revealed by analyzing two of its main articulations (Trotsky's and Mandel's). The hypothesis of a critical Marxist theory of bureaucracy is formulated in the final pages of this second chapter: if capitalism is understood as the domination of an abstract social structure, articulated by the dynamics of value, bureaucracy could be defined as the operator in charge with this conversion of a peculiar historical constellation into an objective and necessary logic, and with the translation of this particular mode of production into a natural human condition. However, in order for this hypothesis to be properly articulated, a few more concepts are required.

The third chapter is meant to provide these concepts, by borrowing them from the theory of Jacques Lacan. The chapter mimics an evolution from elementary concepts to articulated theoretical structures: from the 'atomistic' concepts of signifier, subject, object *a*, to the dual relations between them (alienation, separation, cogito, superego), up to, finally, the social structures that they define, and which are formalized by Lacan in his theory of the four discourses: the discourse of the master, of the university, of the hysterical and of the psychoanalyst. Out of these four discourses, the university one will prove particularly decisive for our theory: it is meant to reveal, according to Lacan, the social roles and structures, together with the subject's primordial inscription in them, that obtain in a society

governed by the abstract principles of expert knowledge – a situation towards which, by the time Lacan formulated this theory (late 1960's), appeared to be the point of convergence of both the advanced capitalism of the West and the state socialisms of the East. Thus, the discourse of the university seems to describe, in a crystallized, mathematical way, the modern social structure implied by the bureaucratic mechanism.

All these elements (the Hegelian theory of the state, Marx's labor theory of value and Lacan's theory of the four discourses) are put together in the final, fourth chapter. The opening pages of the chapter revolve around the discussion of the political relevance of Lacan's theory: contrary to what one might expect from a theory elaborated in a psychoanalytical milieu and whose main concern is a therapeutical one, the theory of Lacan is always already dealing with social and political structures. These two seemingly opposed spheres (private vs. public, subjective vs. social) are to be situated, for Lacan, on the same unique side of a Moebius strip. As a proof of this inherent political dimension in Lacan's theory we have the proliferation of contemporary versions of political Lacanianism, which cover all the political spectrum, ranging from right, liberal, and up to left Lacanians. After a comparative analysis of these trends, the chapter will attempt to re-read the Hegelian architectonic of the state and Marx's labor theory of value through the lenses of Lacan's theory of discourse. From this perspective, the three elements from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* that were emphasized in the first chapter (the crucial role of the civil service, the signifying function of monarchy, the dynamics of civil society) come to be articulated here in a purely dialectical way: firstly, the growing importance and centrality that the civil service comes to acquire in Hegel mark the passage from a social structure organized on the model of the master's discourse to one organized on the model of the university discourse. Just like in Lacan's theory, the master's discourse, in order to endure and reproduce itself, has to become invisible and to be suppressed and conserved in the discourse of the university. But this also means that the social contradictions that this structure generates (and which are revealed in the second moment of this dialectical move) prove to be, in the third and final moment, not the stumbling block of this social structure (as they were for the master's discourse) but its very moving principle. Thus, the civil service, as the objective and universal knowledge ruling over the civil society and as the core of the rational state, manages to succeed in both (or, rather, over both) of its designated checks and balances: it saves the face of the monarch, which it reduces to a mere signature, and it sees that the contradictions at the level of civil society are positively invested and peacefully reproduced, since generated only by the fair principles of abstract right. This dynamic is, as it were,

reproduced in a nutshell in Marx's labor theory of value. This is, after all, a theory meant to describe the way in which the fair observance of formal principles and of objective, impartial knowledge manages to reproduce and integrate the surplus of value. The gradual autonomization of the universal and expert knowledge belonging to the bureaucracy is, here, translated in the structuring role that the means of production and the social division of labor, as both representing the materialized knowledge of the capitalist, come to acquire in the process of production. As for the subject's inscription in this mechanism, it follows the fair rules of the bureaucratic inscription: in the same way in which, in the basic operation of bureaucracy, a particular signifier represents the subject for another, general signifier, in a similar way, in the process of production, the free subject is free to alienate himself in the signifying process of production in which the exchange value of his labor-power is represented for the use value it holds for the capitalist. And in the same way in which, in Lacan's inscription of the subject between two signifiers, a certain remainder is produced – the object *a*, the *plus de jouir* –, in a similar way, in the fair process of representation taking place in the capitalist mode of production, a certain surplus is generated – surplus-value – which can, now, contrary to what happened in the master's discourse, rejoin the master and be fairly appropriated by him.

So, if we were to try to formulate our argument in its most compressed form, it would go like this: the law of value, as the core of the capitalist dynamic, imposes and naturalizes, or rather imposes as natural, a bureaucratic-like process, both in the sense that it translates the social interaction as a process of representation by the signifiers, and in the sense of the dominating role it ascribes to the objective and objectified general social knowledge. And this dynamic is best rendered by means of the Lacanian discourse of the university.

Bureaucracy, or, at least, a certain bureaucratic mechanism, comes thus to be situated at the very core of the capitalist logic. The wonderful capitalist mechanism which consists in converting a specific historical contingency in an objective and necessary logic requires, we argued, a particular agency whose task is precisely this continued transubstantiation of injustice into fairness, and which is ensured by inscribing the free subject – or, rather, the subject's freedom – in a necessary process of representation by a signifier, for another signifier. But the place and function that bureaucracy thus comes to occupy has to do precisely with what, for the Weberian tradition, became the conundrum of the slippery quantitative-qualitative oscillation between the rationality and irrationality of bureaucracy. This paradox is now illuminated, and the problem is solved by positing it as the very

solution: bureaucracy is the institutional, almost transcendental, rationalizer of the structural irrationality of capitalism.

Our critical analysis of bureaucracy, made from this perspective, goes thus against the recurrent romantic attack on the ‘administered society’ and on the domination of abstract, formal principles – a romantic attitude whose classical origins could also be traced in Weber’s fascination with the charismatic leader, as opposed to the nameless official. The fundamental opposition on which this romantic critique plays is the opposition between, on the one hand, abstraction, mediation, reification and, on the other hand, spontaneity, creativity, immediacy. Our developments have tried to show how this kind of critique, far from endangering the smooth functioning of the bureaucratic mechanism, is already taken into account by it, and how the excess and remainder of creativity, immediacy and spontaneity is not the opposite of the bureaucratic sphere, but, on the contrary, the element on whose perpetual generation, inclusion and reproduction the whole bureaucratic mechanism is based.

Surely, this kind of analysis of bureaucracy and capitalism does not conceive of the latter as a simple economical structure or mechanism. Instead, capitalism is defined as an extremely complicated knot, in which logics and history, nature and society, economics and politics all meet. The locus of bureaucracy in this intricate network is that of a particular, unique kind of mediator. A kind of non-vanishing mediator, or better, one whose perpetual mission is to erase its mission, and which, to paraphrase Guy Debord, unites the separate, but it unites it only as separate: while ensuring that the historical contingency is sublated into a natural necessity, it also sees that concerns regarding the expert organization of economy and the social deliberation of politics are properly kept apart. Our interpretation thus goes against the usual view according to which the bureaucratic domain of activity is a clearly circumscribed one, dealing only with the application of the decisions taken elsewhere and with the administration of details, while the grand design of policies belongs to the proper sphere of the elected politicians. Starting from this interpretation, there is only one step towards formulating the critique of the bureaucratic usurpation, in which the mechanical application of decisions seems to gain more importance than the decisions themselves (and even affects and alters those decisions), while the appointed officials have the upper hand over the elected representatives of the people. The interpretation elaborated throughout the thesis started from the assumption that, before circumscribing the bureaucracy to such a delimited sphere of activity, there is a more original function which is taken in charge by

bureaucracy, which regards the primordial social inscription of the free subject, and the consequent distribution of his separate spheres of social activity (politics, economy, law, nature, public, private). Thus, far from being a particular domain of activity in the political and social realm, it is the point from which the different domains of activity are established and distributed, united and kept apart at the same time.

The contemporary relevance of this argument can also stand the objection which could be formulated from the standpoint of the recent neoliberal turn of capitalism, in which the main obstacle on the path towards improved capitalist efficiency seems to lie in the bureaucratic inertia. A closer look at this contemporary development reveals, however, that the critique of bureaucracy is here accompanied also by a critique on the labor theory of value, and by its attempted substitution with more immediate, quite pre-capitalist, ways of generating plus-value, which explain the generation of plus-value either as speculation, as differences between the prices when buying or selling a commodity, or, more importantly, as the inherent capacity of capital and, more exactly, financial capital, to spurn more value from itself. Thus, far from putting into doubt our main thesis, this neoliberal trend only further proves the essential link between bureaucracy and the capitalist law of value: they rise and fall always together.

With respect to the different versions of contemporary political Lacanianism, our present research should be situated among those which are usually labeled as left Lacanianisms. Our argument has almost nothing in common with the right Lacanians, and with their insistence on the imaginary hole in the real, that is, the religious fantasy underlying the seemingly disenchanted structure of the modern society. If there's a fantasy to be unveiled here, it does not lie in the hidden strata of society's imaginary, but on the very public surface, not in our darkest thoughts, but, like the Marxian fetishism, in our daily practices. It's an objective fantasy, not a private – even if common – delusion. As for the liberal Lacanians, our approach stands with them in the same relation in which critical Marxism stands with traditional Marxism. After all, the liberal Lacanians endeavor consisted basically in a simple reversal of traditional Marxism: while for the latter, economy is to be conceived as the absent cause of politics, as the hidden infrastructure of the political superstructure, and, thus, as the Real of the political symbolic, for the liberal Lacanians it is the political which constitutes the stumbling Real of the symbolical and seemingly stable structure of economy and society. Society, or economy, is non-all, and this non-identity with themselves is the political. Though, in spite of its semblance of novelty, this conceptualization of the relation

between politics and economy in terms of the Real lack, or hole, in the symbolic, is pretty old fashioned. After centuries of modern skepticism, the idea that one cannot conceptualize and organize everything in a stable and total structure should come as common sense. The labeling of this Real deadlock in the symbolic by means of the term 'the political', and the attempt to politicize thus our constitutive, be it ontological or epistemological, finitude, is, at best, a mere nominal innovation and, at worst, a debilitating and spurious political radicalization. After all, anybody can understand or experience the Real hole in the symbolic: this is, one could say, the basic experience of experience. What we attempted here goes in a different, and much more complicated direction: by analyzing the bureaucratic formalization, administration and reproduction of the capitalist contradiction, we attempt to grasp nothing less than the symbolic hole in the Real.