

Letter to the Editors

Congratulations for publishing John Markoff's "Governmental Bureaucratization" in your issue for October 1975. It opens up an important new approach for the comparative study of bureaucracy, namely the investigation of citizen pressures as a source of innovation. The *cahiers de doléances* of 1789, expressing revolutionary protests in France, may well be among the first important documentary sources for what has subsequently become an essential basis for bureaucratic reform.

In order to appreciate the significance of Markoff's contribution, however, I believe it is necessary to reconsider the definition of "bureaucracy," a term which Markoff uses as defined, classically, by Max Weber. However, Weber's usage is in terms of an "ideal type," i.e., a projection of tendencies which, if literally applied, define a concept that virtually excludes all historical cases of "bureaucracy." If we distinguish between "defining criteria" which identify the existence of a concept from the "accompanying properties" that may be attributed to a concept in varying degrees, then it becomes apparent that Weber's criteria are better treated as *accompanying* than as *defining* properties. To illustrate, if the definition of a "nation" includes the requirement that a people share a common language, religion and customs, and also have a sense of social homogeneity, then there are probably no "nations" in the world. If one saw an historical tendency to create "nations," marked by the rise of nationalism or the appearance of "nation-building" movements, then we might speak of "nation-ization" as a phenomenon parallel to "bureaucrat-ization," even though no "nation" yet existed. Indeed, I suspect we shall never see any "true" nations, if the criteria given above are insisted on, nor are there any "bureaucracies" if Weber's properties are treated as definitional requirements.

However, if we take his properties as variables, then clearly any existing bureaucracy—defined by other criteria—varies in the degree to which its offices possess "well-defined spheres of competence," its officials "continuously perform" their duties; its appointments are made on the basis of "competence," and its decisions rest on "written records"

plus the application of "general rules to particular cases." Weber's characterizations provide a basis for analyzing bureaucratic performance but not for defining what it is that performs. Until we can agree on a concept of the thing itself that varies on these properties, we cannot resolve the continuing debate to which Markoff alludes.

My own preference for a concept that may appropriately be called a "bureaucracy" is the notion of a "hierarchy of offices serving an organization under the authority of its head." This concept clearly distinguishes between "organization" and "bureaucracy," two terms often used, especially in the sociological literature, as virtual synonyms. Organizations, adapting Theodore Caplow's definition, may be construed as "collectivities possessing *memberships* and the capacity to make *decisions*." It follows that if a bureaucracy is to serve the organization of which it is an agent, then the organization may well (though not necessarily) have a mechanism whereby its members can aggregate their preferences so as to guide the bureaucrats who serve them.

Modern governmental organizations (states) characteristically use such instrumentalities as political parties, popular elections, elected assemblies, interest groups, courts of law, mass media, and opinion surveys to control their bureaucracies. In this usage, I mean by "governmental organization" the total social system of a polity, not just the subset of bureaucratic, electoral, legislative and judicial bodies which are the formal organs of the body politic. Indeed, if we use the rather old-fashioned word "state" for the total organization of the body politic, then we can see that it includes, on the one hand, its bureaucracy and, on the other, it may also have mechanisms for imposing citizen accountability on its bureaucracy—though they may not work effectively and they may not even exist.

These mechanisms for imposing accountability are modern, and they can well be dated from the French, American, and English revolutions. Within the last hundred years, more or less, they have spread to virtually every country of the world, at least in a formal sense—often, of course, very ineffectively. They have, therefore, not fully displaced the traditional mode of governmental organization in which bureaucracies were under the more or less effective control of their heads and, of course, also became more or less autonomous.

Indeed, the tendency toward autonomy of bureaucratic offices, maximized when they became inheritable, led to what we normally call "feudalism." We tend to distinguish between "bureaucracy" and "feudalism," but if we use the definition of bureaucracy, offered above, then we can see that feudalism is a special form of bureaucracy, in which the inheritance of office has fragmented the system and reduced the effective power of its head to mere tokenism. As Coulborn and others

have shown, feudalism is a development (degeneration) within pre-established bureaucratic empires. Energetic rulers could, of course, reverse the trend by building their own counter-bureaucracies to contain the power of nominal subordinates who had become effectively autonomous. Fesler's illuminating study of these processes in medieval France (*CSSH* V [1962], 76–111) describes a tendency that also occurred in Imperial China, Japan, and other European states.

The generalized model for bureaucratic change which I use rests on a triangle of forces, reflecting the countervailing interests of rules, bureaucrat, and citizen. In pre-modern societies, however, the voice of the citizen could not be heard because it lacked instruments for articulation and aggregation. Most of the literature cited by Markoff, accordingly, reflects the struggle for supremacy between ruler and bureaucrat, while the growth of royal power played a decisive role in post-feudal Europe, as it did in the bureaucratic empires described by Eisenstadt. The treatment of the subject given by these authors, however, could be enhanced if they were to give more explicit attention to the efforts of bureaucrats to use their offices for their personal advantage, and the welfare of their families and friends—though not, I think, for any vaguely sensed “class interest.”

The history of the last two hundred years, by contrast, has been marked by the rise of instruments for popular representation which have enabled citizens, especially in democratic polities, to make an independent input for the reform of bureaucratic organization and practice—but not, of course, to eliminate the continuing influence of rulers and the bureaucrats themselves. Meanwhile, with the industrial revolution, the need for administrative services has vastly expanded, and the tools provided by the new technology have greatly extended the scope and potential for bureaucratic power. It would be easy enough to document historical examples of the growing effectiveness of citizen-power as an element in bureaucratic reform—I regret that Markoff seems largely to have overlooked the relevant literature, perhaps because popularly motivated reforms have often led away from rather than toward the Weberian attributes. However, by pointing to the *cahiers de doléances*, he has identified an important source for the study of the earliest stage of this major historical transformation.

The literature to which Markoff does point shows additional defects to the one I have just mentioned. Notable, for example, is the idea that bureaucracy should develop as a response to “system needs.” I doubt if anything ever happens just because it is needed. I would suppose that automobiles, airplanes, and television sets were “needed” for thousands of years before they were ever produced, and surely “bureaucracies” have also been needed by societies that lacked them. At best,

need is a necessary but not sufficient cause, in the sense that if an unneeded innovation is offered, it will scarcely succeed. However, it is surely easier to create a need for something that is available than to meet a need if the wherewithal is nonexistent. By citing an essay of mine in the context of his discussion of system needs, Markoff seems to suggest that I might subscribe to the system-needs explanation, although a close reading of his text shows that I was merely referring to the way in which a non-Western country borrowed foreign models of bureaucracy in the hope that they might help it to meet its needs—a very different thing. My emphasis was placed on the influence of the models, not the “need,” “although of course the two went together.

Speaking more generally, I have difficulty also with modes of historical explanation that focus on single causes, such as the “struggle for power” or the “social and cultural environment.” Surely needs, power, and culture must all be taken into account in any explanation, but attention should be given to concrete actions by identifiable persons and collectivities.

Moreover, different levels or aspects of explanation are required. For example, most explanations focus on the “how” of institutions and behavior, but not on the “why.” To illustrate, we can explain “how” an automobile works by looking at relations between its parts (wheels, carburetor, pistons and cylinders), but we can discover “why” it exists only by looking at the social system which made possible the invention and use of automobiles.

Similarly, most of the literature on bureaucracy is concerned with its “hows”: who the bureaucrats are, how they are trained and recruited, and how money is channeled from various sources for different uses. The literature reviewed by Joseph Strayer in your October 1975 issue is largely concerned with such questions, and they are, of course, important. Indeed, we cannot explain the development of bureaucracies or of anything else without considering *how* it works. In this sense, it is better to treat the Weberian criteria for bureaucracy as dependent rather than independent variables. One does not directly increase the expertise of bureaucrats, for example, but one can change the criteria for recruitment, for examining, training, assigning, regarding, and punishing bureaucrats in such a way as to enhance their expertise. The history of bureaucratic development is, therefore, the history of institutional or structural changes that affect the degree to which the Weberian variables exist. Consequently it is a history of the “how” of bureaucracy, of the working of its parts.

But the explanation of bureaucratic history also requires attention to the “whys,” a question that can be answered only in the total context within which bureaucracies evolved, a context that must be examined

in more detail than just to say that society “needed” bureaucracy. Who needed bureaucracy, when and how badly? Markoff’s article shows that the French people required bureaucrats and they also wanted to change bureaucratic behavior. This is a contribution to the “why.” But it needs to be systematically supplemented. Rulers clearly needed bureaucrats to work for them and, over a long period, they gradually learned how to recruit, train, and use them more effectively for their royal purposes. Problems at the “how” level had to be solved in order to satisfy the needs identified at the “why” level. Much of their “how” learning came by emulating foreign models—not only, I might add, as between European powers. One of the most important modern structural reforms in the West involved the use of written examinations for recruiting officials, a practice first invented in China two thousand years ago and brought to Europe very belatedly, in the nineteenth century, primarily by way of India, through the British-controlled Indian Civil Service. The American civil service reforms of the 1880s were indirectly based, also, on the Chinese model, by way of an adaptation of the British system. However, as Herlee Creel has shown, the influence of the Chinese model of bureaucratic organization came to Europe—without examination—at a much earlier time, via Sicily and the (Holy Roman) Imperial court.

Needless to say, there can be different levels of “why” to explain any single change, and the explanation in terms of “how” is a necessary supplement; without knowing *how*, indeed, *why* is always an inadequate explanation. Markoff’s paper opens up, I believe, an important avenue for broadening the explanation of the “why” of bureaucratic development, provided, of course, the concept of what is developing is revised by rejecting the Weberian variables as defining properties, so that they can be treated, as they should, as accompanying properties, of any bureaucracy.

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