

Editorial Special edition on the Neo-Weberian State

Sam Whimster

Experience tends universally to show that the purely bureaucratic type of administrative organization in its precision, stability, stringency of discipline and reliability ... is, from a purely technical point of view, capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency and is in this sense formally the most rational known means of exercising authority over human beings. (*Economy and Society*)¹

This passion for bureaucratization, such as we have heard expressed here, is enough to drive one to despair. ... the central question is not how we further and accelerate it but what we have to *set against* this machinery, in order to preserve a remnant of humanity from this parcelling-out of the soul, from this exclusive rule of bureaucracy over the ideals of life. (Max Weber's contribution to debate on municipal enterprises in *Verein für Sozialpolitik* meeting, Vienna 1909)²

On the one hand bureaucracy is inevitable, on the other, for the sake of humanity, it is to be resisted. Bureaucratic 'red tape' is everywhere, yet at the same time it should be mocked and derided. At the beginning of the 19th century, William von Humboldt in his *Limits of the State* attacked the rule of officials, while the cameralist Johann von Justi likened that proper state to a faultlessly running machine whose ruler is its soul. What is universal about bureaucracy is the debate over its necessity and how this must be confounded. We have not just one but two *Erkenntnisobjekte*, as Husserl might have expressed it.

This special edition of *Max Weber Studies*, edited by Wolfgang Drechsler and myself, carries the debate forwards. Neo-Weberian State (NWS) theory defends a revised and updated version of bureaucracy, and New Public Management (NPM) takes on the part of the perpetual antagonist of bureaucracy. These debates always have a time-and-place political focus. In 1909, Max Weber and his brother Alfred were

1. Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Soziologie. Unvollendet 1919-1920*, MWG I/23 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), p. 463.

2. Max Weber, 'Diskussionsbeitrag' in *Wirtschaft, Staat und Politik*, MWG I/8 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), p. 363.

vehemently opposing Prussia's and Austria's giant bureaucracies that operated outside political and democratic control. They were mammoth constructions of imperial rule, just as the Indian civil service was the instrument of British imperial rule. Democratic liberals have always demanded reform—J. S. Mill in the India Office and William Gladstone driving the reform of the home civil service, which resulted in the Northcote-Trevelyan reforms—in aspiration a close cousin of Weber's own ideal type.

The bureaucratic machine is critiqued from many political standpoints—not just a liberal critique but anarchist, socialist, libertarian, neo-conservative and populist ones. Regimes and their critics come and go, but they are all dependent on officials running a bureaucracy. Hence bureaucracy is always in the front line of attack from whatever is the political philosophy and ideology of its critics—sometimes more deserved, sometimes less. Bureaucracy may be a constant feature of modern societies, but the critiques are diverse. Weber's ideal type, signalled in the opening quote above (from *Economy and Society*), holds up remarkably well as a description of bureaucracies in modern society. Weber supplied the explanation for this circumstance. Modern societies are characterised by an expanded state, large armed forces, industrial production, and the provision of the needs of mass populations. Both the organization of the large firm and large voluntary bodies like churches as well as the officialdom of state and local state administration demand rational, functional, and expert bureaucracies which have a chain of command.

But because critiques come in many forms, they are less than ideal-typical. Indeed they are specific to the case (*der Fall*) of the country under study. Camilla Stivers argues that in the American case, the bureaucracy was never considered to be other or alien to the citizen. Instead it was the citizens' right to be part of a political administration. Tocqueville's European astonishment that at all levels of government, posts were open to election is one such feature; likewise the spoils system of Andrew Jackson is another. For Stivers and her colleagues administration is not what is done for you—favourable or unfavourable in outcomes, but what the citizen participates in. President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal changed the whole regime of government (from 1935 through to 1980). While a success in terms of salvatory outcomes, the soul of the American citizens (outside the East coast cities) belonged to themselves and was not given in trust to government. Or so the story goes.

In this special edition, a range of both reforms and critiques are presented, neoliberal, authoritarian, Caesarist and populist, technological, and social-democratic. This raises the question of how to work

with the ideal type; in other words, we have to engage with pedagogy. As Wolfgang Drechsler shows, Public Administration (PA) has assumed that the classic ideal type is a fixed set of tools that can be pragmatically developed, and through learning improved upon. But this brackets out politics and ideology. If one returns to Weber's texts the ideal type is laid out succinctly but then is followed by specific cases and actual practice—the latter in a smaller, but no less important, font. It is a pedagogy customised to seminar discussion. As Drechsler notes, we are faced with the complexity of Weber's many texts. Public administration and probably most undergraduate teaching is confined to the chapter 'Bureaucracy' in the Gerth and Mills reader (still the most widely used). Edith Hanke has commented that the topic of bureaucracy is Weber's most important theme. When it comes to the complete works, the thread of bureaucracy is found almost everywhere, as I attempt to show in my own article.

New Public Management (NPM) emerged in the 1980s when President Reagan proclaimed that the state was the problem not the solution. In the United Kingdom Prime Minister Thatcher pursued a market ideology and sought to reduce the size of the state. A new regime was displacing the previous New Deal and welfare state settlement. NPM was the solution of too much public bureaucracy, at least as perceived, and its solution was privatizations, outsourcing, cuts, and private sector management of public organizations. NPM is not a self-appellation but an academic label provided by the Oxford professor of government, Sir Christopher Hood. Broadly speaking it describes the impact of neoliberal and neoconservative ideology on public administration. The articles by Geert Bouckaert, myself and Drechsler consider the large critical literature on NPM and whether it should be adjudged a success. By its own, supposedly testable, output criteria that success has been elusive at best. Instead, cuts to welfare, loss of public service ethos and altruism, inequities, and politicisation of the neutral civil service have resulted.

The Japanese case stands slightly to the side of the NPM onslaught. Hiroko Shimada Logie in her article reveals the extraordinary swings in both public opinion and politics towards Japan's central bureaucracy. It embodied a strong state from 1945 to the 1990s followed by extensive downsizing, and in 2014 top officialdom was placed under the control of the prime minister and his cabinet secretary—an urge not unknown to successive British prime ministers. And the result of all these 'reforms'? Regression to a patrimonial mode of rule, demoralization of the civil service and exhaustion of officials, and high public expectations of the state that can no longer be met.

NPM's greatest impact has been the movement to reform public administration with the aim of reducing PA's vulnerability to neoliberal and libertarian critiques. Over the last two decades Christopher Pollitt and Geert Bouckaert have made the comprehensive case for public management reform. The Weberian state with its indispensable classic features is affirmed but how administration is practised is open to citizen-friendly improvement. PA must be agile, able to innovate on the part of the state and society, and be responsive to citizen needs. This is the theory of the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) and it has had considerable success in the reform of public services in European Union countries, which took a more studied approach to the Anglo-Saxon experience of NPM.

The Anglo-Saxon embrace of market-based organization itself has received huge shocks. As Drechsler notes, the financial markets threw themselves and their bad debts on the state—a reminder that national currencies are public money. The Covid-19 pandemic proved the necessity of public health measures. This remains a major topic of ongoing investigation. Major states moved quickly to commission vaccines from the private sector, which since the SARS outbreak had been recipients of state research funds. Lastly, in a climate of geopolitical conflicts and wars, states affirm their core capacities—to remain autonomous entities not dependent on the logic of global markets; what might be termed state re-building.

For this edition of *Max Weber Studies*, Geert Bouckaert has written a major revision of NWS. Public administration has to remain abreast with society, which in its turn is subject to continuous rationalization—in technology, in digital communication, in production and trade, and—not least—changes in citizens' attitudes, for instance towards 'the family'. Bouckaert places public administration in a three-dimensional orthogonal space. Hierarchy (axis H) and the need for command remains, but is now open to democratization. The practice of economic relations through markets, not least the development of digital communication supplies a second axis (M). The third axis (N) is the trend in social communities to networking. *Economy and Society* in its main chapters underpins this intellectual development: social action/social relationships/the construction of institutions is, in an updated form, the analysis of the ties of networks; the growth and acceleration of market-oriented behaviour is the principal chapter of *ES*; and the chapter on the legitimacy of rule provides not just the reasons why hierarchy is accepted but, in closer detail, the grounds of validity for the acceptance of the various institutions of the state.

Bouckaert and Drechsler, as well as others, have been active in European, American and Asian PA fora arguing the case for the NWS. In

her response from Malaysia, Nadia Monira M. Taib outlines the ‘whole of government’ reform, including the process of reform itself, which is informed by the NWS. Overall, the NWS is not just an intellectual development, but a practice taken up by governments, so much so that the NWS is being created in reality. Post-Eastern bloc countries have been a crucial focus for reform, and here especially we have seen how the NWS, which was meant to be an empirical model explaining why European countries did not follow NPM when this was all the rage, turned into a normative one – administration would be better, for state and citizens alike, the closer it followed the NWS tenets.

Of the Eastern bloc countries, Hungary and Poland have returned to something akin to the authoritarian mode of Soviet bureaucracy. This special edition does not cover this important topic, but Weber’s wider political sociology could be fruitfully used to investigate what Victor Orbán dubbed ‘illiberal democracy’. Iván Szelényi over a long career has tracked and experienced the developments of Eastern European states.³ The reference point is the post-Soviet mode of government and administration. Szelényi resorts to Weber’s patrimonial model of bureaucracy where officials are completely loyal to the ruler and his hierarchy by virtue of an abject dependency. ‘Feudal’ features through the delegation of local rule to oligarchs who are given rights of corporate exploitation by the ruler, recalls the pattern of medieval prebends.

Inspired by Max Weber’s universal-historical vision, the social science of public administration has yet to adequately explore current Chinese bureaucratic rule, in spite of major accomplishments in that field during the last decade or two. Again this, it is a topic urgently requiring further investigation. As in imperial times, China always possessed the largest body of officials ever known, and still does under the People’s Republic. Nowhere else in the world are the armed forces, the economy, the mass of the people, and the one-party state so dependent on officialdom, and we might say the full aggrandizement of Weber’s pessimistic analysis.

Victor Orbán’s ‘illiberal democracy’, which in Weberian terms is a guarantee to ‘his people’ of welfare provision by a protective though authoritarian patriarch, is also a jibe against neoliberal America. Given the cross currents of forms of populism and citizen democracy in the vastness of the United States, any judgement about universal welfare provision, for or against, is hard to make. But these cross currents have thrown up a Caesarist leader in Donald Trump. Caesarism is a concept developed by Weber, and in my article I argue that it is a more appropriate designation

3. Ivan Szelényi, *From State Socialism to Post-Communist Capitalism. Critical Perspectives* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2022).

of the ‘strong man’ leader than the flawed concept of charismatic legitimacy. In the context of public administration, Caesarist rule with its appeal to populist democracy attacks the whole structure and ethos of public administration. This is crystallized, but no means confined to, the stand-off between America’s chief health official Anthony Fauci and Trump’s downplaying of the lethality of the Covid pandemic. Who then was the friend of the citizen? A reforming and democratizing public administration and the steadfastness of civil servants under stress have the better case. Social science and public administrators have, as always, to remain on the case.

This edition of *Max Weber Studies* is based on a workshop that Wolfgang Drechsler and I had planned to be held at University College London’s Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP). This was supposed to be launched with a keynote by Geert Bouckaert and to culminate in a high-level practitioner panel. Unfortunately, Covid-19 made an in-person workshop impossible, both when originally scheduled and during the alternate date, and we then decided not to move online, seeing the general Zoom fatigue, but to focus on a shorter event, ‘only’ with the keynote, comments, and discussion. This took place on Friday, 14 January 2022. The event was chaired and convened by Drechsler and co-organized by Lukas Fuchs. Bouckaert, Stivers, Nadia Monira Mohamed Taib and I spoke; Hiroko Shimada Logie was unavailable at the time due to duties in Japan, but she contributed her comment in writing. The final essay is by Drechsler, reviewing and reflecting especially on Bouckaert. As joint editors of the issue, we would like to thank everyone who contributed or helped.

One of the original purposes of the workshop, as well as of this edition then, is that there is a serious gap between Max Weber research, which *Max Weber Studies* represents, and PA research—surprising given the eminence Weber still holds in PA and the significance of bureaucracy in his own work. We hope that with this issue, we have contributed at least a little to bridging this gap—and we are also happy to give a forum to a significant further development of the theory of the Neo-Weberian State.