



## BUREAUCRACY AND DEMOCRACY

### Call for Papers

#### INTRODUCTION

'We live in a bureaucracy not a democracy' says Elon Musk as a justification for the arbitrary dismissal of federal officials. Similar calls have been heard from European politicians anxious to cut state spending faced with budget constraints. While the brothers Alfred and Max Weber disliked bureaucracy, fearful of its tendency towards a de-humanizing mechanism, they were clear that no state in the modern era could dispense with bureaucracy. Rationality, hierarchy and expertise were necessary but needed to be offset by democratic institutions within a constitutionally legal framework. Alfred Weber placed the emphasis on a humanising culture, Max on a democracy where liberal convictions, whether left or right of centre, led the way.

The presidential assault on the US federal institutions has turned attention back to Max Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy, despite the intervening hundred years in the development of organizational sociology and advances in public administration. Max Weber Studies itself convened a special issue in 2023 on how theory and practice has moved on from the original ideal type.

<<https://maxweberstudies.org/source/files/Forthcoming/Editorial-23.1.pdf>> What emerges is a far more citizen friendly public administration with less hierarchy and a willingness to work with market mechanisms and, above all, a capacity to deliver bureaucratic services quickly and flexibly. The bureaucratic machine was not dead but it was no longer so monolithic; its officials no longer dessicated specimens of Prussian Beruf but professionals with a civilian outlook.

The Webers' unrelenting complaint was that they themselves lived in an imperial bureaucracy and not a functioning parliamentary democracy. The Prussian bureaucracy was efficient and effective but it was stifling, omnipresent and the largest employer in the world. It served one master, the autocratic Prussian state and not the democratically elected Reichstag. Does this now become the operative critique of the Trump administration? Should Musk's statement be corrected to: 'we live in an oligarchy and no longer a federal democracy'? This requires urgent analysis for how is it even possible for oligarchy to take hold in America's uniquely distributed governance?

Max Weber took the view that a mature democracy would not succumb to populist authoritarianism and that a bureaucracy of qualified experts with defined areas of competence was indispensable. America, on which he wrote extensively, was exceptional because it was so democratic; crudely so in its forms and enthusiasms - demagoguery, spoils system, city bosses, horse trading at the national level, the local democracy of townships and Christian sects, but overshadowed by the unresolved colour line and also mass immigration. Is Trumpian populism a throwback to earlier days, and has American politics matured - to reference C. Wright Mills - under the control of the power elites?

## TOPICS OF INTEREST

- Bureaucratic routinization and charismatic disruption.
- The tech elite has killed off media diversity and has created the epistemic grounds for performative politics. This allows the state executive to adopt an irrational form of decisionism with the epistocracy maintaining the ideological support of the populist base. Examples of this are cuts to health and the abrupt termination of USAID.
- Changes to the international order. The tech elite in siding with the Trump administration en bloc have removed the illusion that they are neutral and international force for good. The direct interference of Musk and the X platform into European politics in favour of neo-fascists removes at a stroke the claim of an international order where nation states conduct their politics within an agreed international framework.
- Return of the strategic national state. President Trump's collapse of the globalized world 'order' and his attempt to appropriate as much of the earth's resources as possible signals the return of the national state and the maximum projection of its power. The return of Weltpolitik re-engages the duality of the domestic and foreign faces of the state. The case for rational-legal bureaucracy takes on a new significance for all countries. If we take four of the largest countries in the world, three (China, India, Indonesia) remain focused on a high-competence bureaucracy. Can the USA ignore this? Also what are the lessons for the European Union as it scrambles to assemble itself as an independent geopolitical entity?

## REAPPRAISING WEBER

- Limitations of legal-rational legitimacy. Weber's ideal type of legal-rational legitimacy is being flagrantly challenged, and not just in Washington. To the extent that this ideal type was heuristic, it lacked the substantive validity offered by democratic practice. And to the extent it drew on formal

rationality for its validity, the rule of state law was coercive in the Kelsian sense, and plainly decisionist in 'Schmittian' cases. This remains open to debate.

- Populism and democracy. Weber in his political writings struggled with the populist demagogic nature of democracy, endorsing the plebiscitary president and at the same time trusting to the power of lawful political institutions.
- Church and sect and American Evangelicals in relation to the Trump base.
- Widening the typology of rulership. Neo-patrimonialism, patriarchalism, caesarism and its recent version - autogolpe, charisma, plebiscitary leadership, ethnic nationalism are all part of the Weberian lexicon of political sociology. How are these types to be developed?
- Other novel forms are in the making and require analysis. AI is the standout development and Trump's executive D.O.G.E. programme aims to replace bureaucracy with technocracy, going as far as machine learning allows. If successful, governments around the world will take note. But, it needs emphasizing that AI is programmable to policy and political choices. Also, the bureaucracy's files are data collected by the administrative state and entrusted by citizens to the state for safekeeping. What, it may be asked, does techno-citizenship look like?

The Weberian analysis of the state has returned as a major issue. In calling for papers we realize that it is too early to categorize the second Trump presidency, not least because of its performative showmanship. Commentators and op-ed writers have reacted instantly and brilliantly to the initial un-constitutional actions of the second Trump presidency, and close examination of how a mature democracy absorbs these blows is definitely required.

#### INFORMATION ON SUBMITTING

The journal will publish contributions, both short and longer, online at [maxweberstudies.org](http://maxweberstudies.org). Submissions are invited from across interdisciplinary fields including sociology, political science, public administration, organizational studies, leadership studies, media and internet studies. The online contributions will be consolidated after refereeing into a special issue of Max Weber Studies.

Using the Max Weber Studies website, please use the Submission tab and, at Submission Title, write 'Bureaucracy and Democracy Call for Papers'.  
<<https://maxweberstudies.org/submission>>

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