Urban Bureaucracy and the Policy Process

Jesús A. Treviño C.

1. What are the defining characteristics of a bureaucracy (as per Weber and Merton)?

(a) Weber introduces his idea of 'bureaucracy' using the word 'officialdom':

(i) S/he works in fixed and specific areas of authority ordered by rules (laws or administrative regulations).

(ii) S/he is subject to principles of hierarchy.

(iii) S/he separates official activity or 'the office' as something different from private life.

(iv) S/he acquires a technical training to 'manage the office'.

(v) S/he usually enjoys a distinct social esteem (status)

(vi) S/he, if of the pure bureaucratic type, is *appointed* by a superior authority. It is worth to note that an official elected is an 'office-holder' but not an official (ideal type). I do not think Weber correctly applies this "pure bureaucratic type" here. In fact, since most of bureaucrats in modern states are appointed from above, most bureaucrats today match to this Weberian ideal type.

(vii) An official normally holds a life-long tenure and a retirement pension 'to ensure the devoted performance of official duties, without regard for extraneous pressures'.

Merton, considering Weber's definitions or characterization of bureaucracy, follows a different strategy. Based on the principle that every bright side has its dark side, as Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, he centers on dysfunctions of bureaucracy to explain the 'bureaucratic structure and personality': "Weber is almost exclusively concerned with

what the bureaucratic structure attains: precision, reliability, efficiency. This same structure may be examined from another perspective provided by the ambivalence" (Merton 1957, 102). Thus, Merton approaches the bureaucratic character that Weber describes as 'methodical, prudent, and disciplined'. Merton points out that discipline becomes part of the life of the bureaucrat and converts him rigid and unable to adjust to the changing reality: "the very elements which conduce toward efficiency in general produce inefficiency in specific instances" (Merton 1957, 103). This discipline in a bureaucratic structure also creates depersonalization of relationships. The strict bureaucrat attachment to the rule ignores the individual cases; the client, seen as another number in the line, interprets it as 'bureaucratic arrogance'. Merton observes that a graded career, promotion plans, incremental salaries and retirement pensions (mentioned by Weber) create a similar effect: In his adherence to this plan of life and career, the bureaucrat 'induces timidity, conservatism, and technicism.' (Merton 1957, 103). Merton highlights Weber's mistake of generalizing the strict adherence of the bureaucrat to regulations as a condition of efficiency. The training required to follow this strict adherence to regulations may work against the bureaucrat in changing conditions not recognized as significantly different. An additional trait in the bureaucrat's personality refers to the Dewey's "occupational psychosis." People performing daily routines develop apathy, laziness, internal quarrels, intrigues and sabotages.

Briefly, from Weber's and Merton's analyses, we have four meanings of bureaucracy:

1. *People* that perform administrative functions.
2. The *relationship* of people in the administrative class.
3. The *power* of administrators.

4. ‘Bureopathy’ or malfunctioning of the administrative body.

However, when people think about bureaucracy usually have in mind something different (or partially different) to what Weber and Merton said:

—More people than it is necessary for a specific task (economic inefficiency)

—Multiplication of forms and formalities (red tape).

—Avoidance of personal responsibility and decision that creates delays in public services deliveries (Passing the buck).

—Straightforward interpretation of rules and procedures, regardless the objective they are designed to accomplish (mentioned by Merton).

2. What is meant by the term “representative bureaucracy”? How has this term been applied to policy effectiveness and legitimacy of state programming?

Meaning. “The concept of representative bureaucracy was originally developed to argue for a less elite, less class-biased civil service” (Krislov 1974, 368). In the USA, terms as elite and class are substituted by race, ethnicity, and sex. The basic idea is that the variety of social groups must be satisfied to appropriately incorporate their ‘multiple realities’. Representative bureaucracy deals with *equity* (equal opportunity policies in terms of sex or race), no with *equality* (equal access to wealth). And certainly the first one does not imply the second one. Representative bureaucracy “seeks to make bureaucracy more representative demographically. The intent is to make bureaucracy a mirror of a microcosm of the population at large, even if only imperfectly so, and thus to have the bureaucracy embody the diversity of interests, needs, and points of view held by individuals in society ” (Cook 1992, 414). The representative bureaucrat resembles the people s/he represents and thinks as they think and feels as they feel (Cook 1992, 415).

One **part** of representative bureaucracy is about equity. BUT **most** arguments for representative bureaucracy are more concern with control and responsiveness. “If. . . the social origins of the civil service mirror the social origins of the general population, then we can be sure that socialization experiences are similar, attitudes are similar, and policy is responsive to public needs” (Meier, *Politics and the Bureucracy*, 1979, quoted by Cook 1992, 415).

In the context of stability and planning expertise, representative bureaucracy provides social stability, but expertise does not guarantee program success and organizational effectiveness because they depend on “a lucky confluence of circumstances rather than to the systematic application of expert knowledge and skills” (Cook 1992, 426). In public policy, it is a common mistake to judge a plan based on its outcome. Because it is hard to control all variables influencing social action, it may result that a bad plan provides goods results and a technically perfect plan may fail.

> Most meditated plans and cunning orders seem bad, and any army expert criticizes them when they were not useful to win the battle, whereas mediocre plans and orders seem excellent and sage men dedicate them several volumes to demonstrate their excellence when they were used to win the battle. (Tolstoi 1997, 10ª part, Chapter XXVIII, my translation)

3. What is bad policy analysis? What are some common mistakes made in the pursuit of understanding public agency action?

(i.) *Practitioner daily inertia (Being in a rut).* “Locked into a solution, both analyst and client ignore that circumstances have changed or that constraints exist” (Meltsner 1976, 453, also Merton 1957). Any decision has a time lag. At the time you read these lines I may have an additional insight or a more efficient way to express this idea. Our

knowledge about reality has to be like a checking account. We need to be careful about our expenses and keep an eye on the balance. Similarly, in policy analysis we need to continuously check if our concepts represent what they should represent (a positive knowledge balance) and, if the reality has changed, to adjust them to avoid a 'knowledge deficit' (red balance).

(ii). *Too far away (or too close, I would add).* In architecture there is a principle that says that to appreciate a building's façade the observer has to be at a distance as far as twice its height. If s/he is too close, s/he cannot see the whole picture. If too far away, s/he cannot appreciate important structural and functional details. Same thing happens with an analyst that provides advice from a distance or 'out of focus' recommendation.

(iii). *Late advice sin (Forget the policy process).* It occurs because the analyst does not want to release anything until he gets all the information. This is equivalent to the poker player that does not put his cards on the table until he gets a full hand when any hand is the best one if the rest of the players have nothing. Decision-making at the higher level that waits for a full hand of information is inefficient. The sin of late advice is similar to the "steps syndrome." To receive late information it is analogous to remember an important issue for a meeting that already has dismissed or when you are in the steps leaving the building.

(iv). *Superficial advice (Know too little).* It usually is a quick advice not based on enough digging into the roots of the problem. Does the client have a problem? Fire the head of the department and let him to fix it; after all, that is his job. The client and the analyst care much about acceptance of the advice than the appropriate analysis of the problem. In

doing so they do not face off the real or structural cause of the problem. However, it is hard, and sometimes dangerous, to qualify an advice only considering the decision-making outcome. When external or non-controlled variables have a considerable weight, we may have a superficial advice and still have goods results.

(v). *Frameless advise (Excessive reactions).* It is a topical advice, often unarticulated and reactive to specific visible events, ignoring the less visible but no the less important ones. It ease to illustrate with any sentence out of context or any issue pulled out the broader strategy or agenda.

(vi). *Analyst's survival strategy (Change for its own sake).* Many organizational fads (X-efficiency theory, Z-theory, learning or intelligent organization) come every year creating a "market of advisors." The advisor suggests changes to keep his job, but both the advisor and the client have to be aware that "It is difficult to evaluate a program if we do not let it operate for a while" (Meltsner 1976, 456).

(vii). *Advice without politics*. Clients elected usually do not want advice on the political issue because they are smart enough to be elected. They expect from the expert a technical judgment, without political variables. This request is equivalent to ask for a superficial or 'half-framed' advice.

This seven sins list is far away to be complete. There are other 'deadly' sins that may be included here:

1. *Efficiency concept sin*. To use the same definition of efficiency for different level of planning is senseless. As an example, in strategic planning, where actors' interactions

continuously change the environment, the rate of success, in the best case, is around 20%. Anyway, this percentage it does not make sense if the action does not reach its goal. In operative planning that percentage should be close to 100% because we would open boxes with two left shoes or receive *The Star Telegraph* with two local sections. A sin even worst is to use one criteria of efficiency in one level of planning (say operative) to evaluate the other one (say strategic).

2. *Redundancy sin*. To provoke something that is going to happen anyway.

3. *Interference sin*. To make something negative that otherwise would be positive.

4. How did Lipsky's conception of bureaucracy change the understanding of bureaus as a unit of study?

Lipsky's changed the study and approach of bureaucracy pointing out the relevance of a specific type of bureaucrat, the low-level or street-level bureaucrat. Lipsky's contributions, based on the street-level bureaucrat, may be classified in two main areas: the bureaucratic personality and the bureaucratic activity. 1. Personality. Street level bureaucrats are *instances of policy delivery*, such as police officers and other law enforcement personnel, teachers, social workers, judges, public lawyers, health workers. Lipsky stresses two main points on the street-level bureaucrats: (i) they are not indifferent to people's lives and opportunities as in Weber's conception. "The policy delivered by street-level bureaucrats is most often immediate and personal. They usually make decisions on the spot. . . . and their determinations are focused entirely on the individual" (Lipsky 1980, 404). (ii) the activity of the street-level employee hardly fits into Merton's 'bureaupathy': "the reality of the work street-level bureaucrats could hardly be farther

from the bureaucratic ideal of impersonal detachment in decision making" (Lipsky 1980, 405).

2. Activity. Considering the bureaucratic activity, two additional contributions to the bureaucracy as a unit of study should be mentioned: (i) the street level bureaucrat is more than the last link of the chain in a top down process. On the contrary, to Lipsky the *public policy is considerably determined where the street-level bureaucrats and the citizens meet*. Street-level bureaucrats *as a result of their interaction with citizens,* determine the policy designed at higher levels. (ii) *main problems and tensions* generated around public services delivery *arise from the diverse conceptions of the function* by bureaucrats and citizens rather than neglect, laziness, arrogance usually attributed to the public employee or to the client

Lipsky does not forget to provide a methodological note: public service agencies that employ significant street-level bureaucrats in proportion to their labor force are called street-level bureaucracies. It means that not every street level bureaucrat works in a street-level agency nor that street level agencies only have street level bureaucrats.

The street-level bureaucracy fills the gap between policy design and citizen, corrects operative mistakes, and sends its feedback to the higher levels on possible changes or trends. We should not forget, however, that the street-level bureaucracy does not have the whole picture of the policy process. It is just the necessary complement to policies designed at the higher level.

5. What role does public opinion have on the policy process?

What is known as ‘public opinion’ is not really ‘public’, but it is the expression of groups of interest with access to different channels of communication to express their concern in relevant instances of decision-making. In this sense, it is not the public or mass opinion but the elite opinion what determines public policy. Furthermore, sometimes such groups make the mass believe that their opinion is its opinion.

To create and mobilize public opinion is particularly important in the agenda setting stage. Once problems are identified (Problem Identification) and included (or not included) in the agenda (Agenda Setting), the rest of the public policy process (Policy Formulation, Policy Legitimation, Policy Implementation, and Policy Evaluation) centers on the means rather than the ends: “Deciding what will be the problems is even more important than deciding what will be the solutions” (Dye, 37). Agenda setting is not a ‘magic happening’ but a social construction of influential individuals, organized groups of interest and other relevant social actors. Main groups of interest seek the mass media (press, TV) control in order “to determine what people will talk about and think about” (Dye, 38). In this way, groups of interest create public opinion and social pressure to set the agenda or support their initiatives in any stage of the policy process.

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