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INTRODUCTION

We are all aware of the importance which large organizations have assumed, and will increasingly assume, in modern societies. Most of us are employed, more or less directly, by large organizations; most of the goods we consume are mass-produced by these same organizations. Our leisure and even our cultural life are dominated by other large organizations: the cities in which we reside are themselves large organizations whose complexity is beyond our understanding. In order to exercise effectively our rights of dissent and representation we must employ, at least in part, the large organization—a mode of action essential to modern man.

Evolution in this direction has always evoked fears. The term "large organization" makes one think "bureaucracy"—i.e., unnecessary complications, constraining standardization, the stifling of individual personality. These seeming concomitants of the development of large organizations, and their spreading into all phases of human activity frighten many people.

We constantly associate large organization with bureaucracy, speaking, for example, of "the menace of bureaucracy." Is the association a legitimate one? Does it not involve a confusion of vocabulary that permits us to describe any large organization as a "bureaucracy" and to designate as "bureaucratization" the evolution of modern societies to an economic and social system dominated by large organizations? The growing utilization of complex organizations is a means of action indispensable to modern man. But does this really condemn us to endure more and more "bureaucratic" practices, in the popular pejorative sense of the term?

Questions such as these, which should certainly have been considered as open, have been ignored until the present.¹ Attention has been called to the accelerated growth of large organizations and, in particular, to the extent to which their internal government differs

¹ This generalization, like all generalizations, is in fact only partially true. Numerous references will be made in this study to the work of our predecessors who have more or less directly touched upon this problem.

Michel Crozier: The Bureaucratic Phenomenon

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from the democratic ideal. The problem thus posed could not be a problem of diagnosis, but one of remedy only. And the debate has mainly been limited to the passionate interventions of scholars, revolutionaries, reformists, and traditionalists, who seek above all to convince us that their prescriptions constitute the only efficient means of fighting against the conformity, sterility, and dehumanization which threaten modern man.

Personally, we believe that such discussions are premature. Remedies cannot profitably be argued before we have gained a more thorough knowledge of the disease. To understand this malady of bureaucracy better, we must for the time being abandon the anecdotal history of its vicissitudes and devote ourselves to a scientific—i.e., functional—study. It is the basic objective of the present work to provide such a study. We shall examine the bureaucratic phenomenon, as it is found within the context of human activities, at the core of organizations which characterize our present world. Thus we hope to provide an indispensable factual basis from which, perhaps, later studies can discuss in more realistic terms than heretofore the consequences for civilization and for modern man of the growth of large organizations and the development of new forms of organization.

To achieve this, we shall first present at length the especially significant case studies of two French administrative organizations—about whose “bureaucratic” character (in the pejorative sense of the term) everyone is agreed. Our orientation, at the same time empirical and abstract, is very different from the traditional ideological ones. Nevertheless, it produces, no less than they, some highly ambitious—perhaps overambitious—projects. On the basis of our first analyses, we intend to elaborate a theory of the bureaucratic phenomenon that may be inserted both into a general theory of the functioning of organizations and into a general theory of cultural systems. Such an enterprise remains hazardous to the extent to which it is difficult to confront, on the still very uncertain ground of the bureaucratic phenomenon, two different theories at very different levels of conceptualization. But it is essential. The problems of human relations posed by the study of bureaucratic practices can be understood only if both the needs inherent to the functioning of complex organizations, and also the cultural givens to which all participants of the bureaucratic game, in a given society, must subscribe, are taken into account.

After a first relatively rigorous theoretical generalization on the functioning of organizations, we shall therefore propose a broader primary synthesis that integrates a series of cultural elements. This synthesis will be more in the nature of a tentative hypothesis than

a systematic theory. However, it will permit us to formulate some answers to the fundamental questions which we have posed.

Such a program calls for certain preliminary explanations, both of the area delimited for study and of method and objectives. Let us first attempt to state precisely the nature and limits of our subject. We will not begin with a narrow definition of the bureaucratic phenomenon. In launching our research, we have deliberately chosen not to depart from an a priori definition. On the contrary, we shall analyze, in their real complexity and as they are currently experienced, facts and behavior which are generally considered bureaucratic, in order to discover what theoretical model they may fit. It would be contrary to this spirit to define the problem precisely in advance: the analysis itself aims at a delimitation of it. In the perspective which we have chosen, elaborating a theory consists of arriving at a more scientific definition of a phenomenon; and the act of defining becomes the goal, not the point of departure, of the research.

If we cannot here define the bureaucratic phenomenon, however we can trace, at least in rough outline, the area of our study, its objectives, and the type of contribution we wish to make. The term “bureaucratic,” as we have already remarked, is vague and lends itself to confusion. Three main uses of it seem to have become distinct in the social sciences.

The first and the most traditional usage corresponds to a concept of political science: bureaucracy is government by bureaus. In other words, it is government by departments of the state staffed by appointed and not elected functionaries, organized hierarchically, and dependent on a sovereign authority. Bureaucratic power, in this sense, implies the reign of law and order, but, at the same time, government without the participation of the governed. The second usage originates with Max Weber and has been propagated especially by sociologists and historians: bureaucratization is the rationalization of collective activities. This bureaucratization is brought about by, among other means, the inordinate concentration of the units of production and in general of all organizations and the development within these of a system of impersonal rules, as much for the definition of functions and the repartition of responsibilities as for the ordering of careers. The third usage corresponds to the vulgar and frequent sense of the word “bureaucracy.” It evokes the slowness, the ponderousness, the routine, the complication of procedures, and the maladapted responses of “bureaucratic” organizations to the needs which they should satisfy, and the frustrations which their members, clients, or subjects consequently endure.

Much of the difficulty and sterility of discussions of the problem of bureaucracy stem from this uncertainty of vocabulary. The three usages are all the more difficult to distinguish in that the three different phenomena which they evoke are not unrelated. When one speaks of the development of "bureaucratic procedures" within large modern organizations, the term is understood by reference to the tradition of state bureaucracies and to the revulsion the public feel against them. When, on the other hand, one studies bureaucracy in the political sense, one is generally affected by the perspective of the rise of "bureaucratization," which is made to seem ineluctable by the concentration of the units of production. These references would be quite natural in any case, since large private organizations have been influenced by the models elaborated by public bureaucracies, the bureaucratization of private enterprise seems to be paralleled by an extension of state administrations, and the frustrations of the public are addressed indifferently to one or the other type of organization. But the identical vocabulary seems to suggest that all these phenomena are totally interdependent, while in fact the parallelism of their evolution and the identity of their consequences have not been demonstrated.

We have chosen to base ourselves exclusively on the third usage. The subject to which we refer in speaking of the bureaucratic phenomenon is that of the maladaptations, the inadequacies, or, to use Merton's expression, the "dysfunctions," which necessarily develop within human organizations. This choice does not mean that we wish to criticize the other usages, to ignore work which has touched upon bureaucratization in Weber's sense or on bureaucracy in the political sense, or even to withdraw from the general controversies which such studies have raised. It was determined rather by the feeling that historical, predictive, and political analyses connected with these problems are merely marking time—to the extent to which they are unable to rid themselves of the implicit value judgments of the anti-bureaucratic general climate in which they indirectly participate.

In this perspective it will be better understood why a clinical approach which bears upon particular cases, and generalizes only from an intimate understanding of these cases, can serve us better than a systematic approach that seeks immediately to establish rigorous laws and thus gives the appearance of being more scientific.

Our work corresponds, in fact, to an indispensable phase of scientific development, that which could be termed the exploratory phase. At this stage, the most important thing is to elaborate the problem. The elaboration can be effected only by developing sys-

tems of hypotheses still close to the concrete, but going beyond the affirmation of banal interdependences and appearing solid and significant enough to be tested in a later phase.

Hypotheses are tested throughout the course of such elaboration; but these are descriptive hypotheses which permit only an understanding, and in part a measurement, of the diverse systems of relations constituting the phenomenon under analysis in the particular case studied. They are directly valid only for the case under investigation and the lessons they furnish do not constitute laws, but only *examples*—examples of models of systems of relations in action. These examples, however, can teach us more about the functioning of social systems of the same order and of even vaster systems than laws which a premature rigor has kept from being adequately comprehensive.

To resolve upon a clinical approach may seem regressive after certain earlier ambitions of the social sciences. However, this seems to us indispensable for all those problems which touch upon the sociology of institutions and the sociology of action. There are no shortcuts possible. General statistical relations, which can be perceived at the opinion level, are fragmentary and undifferentiated; they can testify to accomplished changes, but not to the process of change, nor to the laws of action, nor even to the general direction of the evolution. Only models of functioning at an operational level can help us progress. This is what a clinical approach can offer us. In the case under discussion, that of the "bureaucratic" aspects of the functioning of modern organizations, a clinical approach will enable us to insert a greater number of givens into the traditional schema borrowed from Weber, whose ideal type, in our opinion, corresponds to an inadequate description. The clinical approach will, above all, enable us to advance from a static fragmentary image to an integrated image of the model, all of whose elements are interdependent.

Finally, in adopting the clinical approach, we have experimented with a play of relations between empirical research and theoretical reflection that the reader may find surprising. All theory, of course, originates in a partial and insufficient contact with reality; but this origin is generally masked in the social sciences because of the separation between empirical research and theoretical problems. We have sought to bridge this gap and to use the confrontation between the two modes of thought as a stimulus for each of them. The exploratory situation which we have chosen invites this procedure and we have tried to profit from it. We believe that it is, in fact, at this modest level that the most fruitful exchanges can be established. And

the contrast between rather vast theoretical ambitions and the relative narrowness of the subject of inquiry offers, along with many inconveniences, certain decisive advantages.

Our objectives have begun to emerge from these few remarks on our approach, but we shall state them more precisely. We have already specified that we wish to elaborate a theory which can be inserted both into a general theory of organizations and into a general theory of cultural systems. Let us first situate the theory of organization in relation to our own research.

As we have emphasized from the beginning of this Introduction, the development of large organizations constitutes one of the essential characteristics of modern industrial society. This is recognized by everyone. However, many have misunderstood the significance, in terms of the logic of action, of the passing of a world of small entrepreneurs, subject to the insecurities of an unpredictable human and natural universe, in favor of a world of much more stable large economic units capable of long-term prediction. It is argued, in fact, that the directors of these large units can determine their actions with the same independence as the heads of small traditional enterprises could determine theirs, without having to take any more into account than did the latter the resistance of the human means at their disposal. So schematic a view would be valid only in a mechanistic model of the complete subordination of all the rank and file to the directors of the organization—a model which has been proposed but which in no way corresponds to the practical experience of the conduct of human affairs, on either the economic or the political plane. In our modern world, the progress of standardization, of predictability, and of rationality in general paradoxically seems to be accompanied by an increasing dependence on the indispensable human means, who maintain their autonomy in regard to the goals of the organization much more easily than heretofore.

It is this intuitive experience of the resistance of the means and of their decisive importance that the sociology of organizations is seeking to ground scientifically, in order to understand the very framework of the social game and the narrow limits restraining the margin of liberty of all action. In studying the problems posed by the functioning of those large units within which most of the collective activities of industrial society will one day take place, the sociology of organizations aims to widen the basis of theories of action—of which it should increasingly constitute one of the essential foundations.

Such concentration on the means seems at first sight remote from

a global analysis of society and may shock those who are used to reasoning solely in macrosociological terms. It constitutes, however, one of the elements essential to all truly comprehensive macrosociological study. It is only through scrutinizing the means that one may hope to view the mechanisms of social control and the processes of change that play such an important role in the development of social systems.

The analysis of the bureaucratic phenomenon, in the dysfunctional sense of the term which we have retained, falls quite naturally into this perspective. Ponderousness and "bureaucratic" routine can easily be interpreted as aspects of the resistance of the human means to the organizational goals. In order to understand them, one is obliged to refer to a sociology, or at least a theory, of organizations, for dysfunction can make sense only in comparison with ideally good functioning. A theory of bureaucracy thus necessarily constitutes a particular facet of a more general theory of organizations, which in turn should itself form the essential element of a sociology of action valid for a global study of society.

Our two case studies, viewed as significant examples of the bureaucratic phenomenon, not only furnish us with information especially crucial to the sociology of organizations, but are also of very great interest for the analysis of cultural systems. The resistance of the human means that is manifested in them is profoundly linked with certain primary behavior and with certain traits characteristic of the cultural system—in this case, the French cultural system. The study of these cultural aspects of the bureaucratic phenomenon will permit the introduction of a new dimension into the sociology of organizations. It seems possible to elaborate a general and universal theory of organizations, dealing with the differences between social and cultural systems only parenthetically. However, as soon as one embarks on the study of the pathology of organizations, cultural analysis becomes an indispensable tool which permits the delimitation of the global theory and its application in different cultural contexts.

At the same time—and this is our final objective—an analysis such as this might make possible a renewal of theories of cultural systems. It might be considered, in some respects at least, as more useful than traditional approaches for viewing cultural systems in terms of current reality. Until the present, cultures or cultural groups were analyzed primarily in terms of their value systems and the special psychological traits of an ideal "basic personality." They were rarely viewed in terms of the problems of action and, in particular, of the problem of the human means necessary to action in complex industrial societies.

The study of the bureaucratic phenomenon permits a new breakthrough at this more "operational" level. It brings to light the means of social control used, within each cultural system, to arrive at ends necessitated by techniques which have become universal. The pathology of organizations develops from the relative incompatibility between their goals, which spring from a type of utilitarian rationality, and the means of social control, which are determined by the primary behavior and values characteristic of the cultural system of which the organizations are part.

Study in this area is of great interest because it lies, for all the reasons stated above, just at the intersection of these two systems, i.e., the one area where men maintain a certain margin of liberty and where changes can be effected. One cannot directly modify values, much less the basic personality. However, the imperatives of action, the will to succeed, the advantages gained from eliminating pathological features from the system of organization on which one is dependent—these can lead to a choice of structures, to the imposition of types of relations that will ultimately have repercussions on values and the basic personality. It is only through action—i.e., by acting through institutions and by modifying these institutions themselves—that a society can transform itself. A sociology of organizations and a sociology of cultural systems are thus equally necessary to a general theory of action. The study of the bureaucratic phenomenon makes a valuable contribution to both.

One final remark seems indicated. We have spoken of systems of organization, of cultural and social systems. We have presented the elaboration of a theory as the search for a definition which accounts for the conditions of equilibrium and the development of the phenomenon in question. All these formulas connote a functionalist orientation. We do, in fact, maintain that a functionalist perspective constitutes a necessary phase of all sociological research and that it is particularly indispensable at present in a discipline the majority of whose problems are still at an exploratory stage. But this methodological necessity entails the risk of the gradual transformation of the functionalist method, the essential tool of a rational sociology, into a functionalist philosophy—the complacent approbation of uncovered interdependences. It is easy to succumb to this tendency to the extent to which it is believed that phenomena have been definitively explained that, in fact, have been merely described in their momentary state. We have sought to guard ourselves from this defect by keeping constantly foremost the problem of change, both at the level of our case studies, in our discussion of a general theory of organization, and in our essay on the models of action characteristic of the

French cultural system. The reader should not be astonished, therefore, if our conclusion consists simply of reflections on change and on the framework and limitations of action in the world of large organizations and within complex cultural systems.