

Key characteristics of bureaucracy



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List the key characteristics of bureaucracy. What was it about bureaucracy that Max Weber saw as positive? What did he see as negative? Sociologist and philosopher Max Weber has contributed significantly toward our understanding of social and political institutions role in everyday situations. If economists such as John Kenneth Galbraith and, more recently, Joseph Stiglitz have brought clarity to the study of dominant institutions, it was Weber who paved the way for this field of study. Weber's work on the subject were preceded by Karl Marx and succeeded by Michel Crozier, but it was he who conducted in-depth analyses, especially as applicable to practical everyday situations. And he, more than anybody else, brought the term bureaucracy into mainstream sociological discourse.

Weber's work dealt with such dominant socio-political institutions like religious authorities, the government, industrial corporations, etc. And in the case of the government, it is through bureaucracy that it interacts with the general population. Bureaucracy can generally be said to contain the following key characteristics: efficiency, organization, procedures, protocols, laws, regulation, regimentation, specialization, etc. Weber added his own perspectives to the understanding of this construct. Firstly, Weber was not wholly critical of bureaucracy. To the contrary, he saw several positive attributes attached to the ideal type. While admitting that even the ideal type bureaucracy can be construed as legal domination, he goes on to say that it is an advancement over earlier forms such as charismatic domination and traditional domination (Huber and Shipan, 2002). In its ideal conception, bureaucracy brings efficiency, organization and concentration of the means of administration. There is also a spirit of egalitarianism seen in this type,

whereby the institution helps level the social and economic differences of the general population. On the flip side, the bureaucratic experience can be impersonal and inhumane at times.

Weber associated the rise of bureaucracy with the industrial revolution and the attendant flourishing of the capitalist system. Hence, he sees as connection between modernity, capitalism, urbanization and the bureaucratic rationalization of society. In his influential essays such as *The City and Capitalism* and *Rural Society in Germany*, Weber acknowledges the “ disappearance of the sociological relevance of the urban-rural distinction. The growth of the nation-state, the development of capitalism as an international order, and the bureaucratic rationalization of more and more areas of social life all mean that the distinctiveness of " urban" and " rural," as referencing different communities is gradually disappearing.” (Sayer, 1991)

One of Weber's criticisms of bureaucracy lay in the fact that it does not lend itself for special cases and individual-specific needs. Bureaucracy tends to impose a certain uniformity and homogeneity both in terms of expectations of, and dispensations to the general population. This way, bureaucracy can be a hindrance to the progress of society as a whole. Bureaucracy also aids to maintain existing power relations in a given society, thereby serving the interests of the ruling elite more than the masses. The agencies and offices that comprise the bureaucratic machinery can be hostile places for dissenting voices and critical thoughts. In this system, officials tend to become corrupt easily and shirk their duties and responsibilities. (Huber and Shipan, 2002) Hence, bureaucracy as it exists in reality is much less effective an institution compared to the ideal type envisioned by Weber.

References:

Sayer, D. (1991). *Capitalism and Modernity: An Excursus on Marx and Weber*.

New York: Routledge.

Huber and Shipan. (2002). *Deliberate discretion: The institutional foundations of bureaucratic autonomy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.