Weber: Modern Bureaucracy and Capital

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Max Weber wrote about structure and order as necessary components of societal organization. He describes it as essential for its ability to outperform other systems, with traits like consistency, speed, organization, and meritocracy fueling its superiority. Weber's analysis is not uncritical of these phenomena, noting flaws in its ability to provide fulfillment on an individual level. Using Weber and Ritzer's writings, I seek to explore Weber's concept of bureaucracy and examine its application today by synthesizing it with Marx's concept of capital. As mentioned previously, Weber discusses some of the qualities of bureaucracy, one of which being their meritocratic nature. As Weber writes, "The official who is not elected, but appointed by a master, normally functions, from a technical point of view, more accurately because it is more likely that purely functional points of consideration and qualities will determine his selection and career" (Weber, 2015). The point here is that in a hierarchal structure, positions of authority are determined by a judgement of other officials who have experience and whose interests lie in the structures that also appointed them. Weber argues that qualifications can be determined by those with expertise, thereby ensuring that longevity of the bureaucracy by selecting officials who have proven their abilities.

A problem arises here when this model of organization makes its way into the private sector, as Ritzer discusses in his analysis of bureaucracy and explanation of McDonaldization. While discussing the ability for bureaucracy to quantify its success with calculability, Ritzer writes, "This calculation does not take into account an important point, however: The high profits of fast-food chains indicate that the owners, not the consumers, get the best deal" (Ritzer, 1993). Implied in this analysis is also the fact that workers, those on the lower rungs of the bureaucratic ladder also do not see the high return of McDonaldized systems. While this structure clearly works to maximize profits, it fails nonowners at increasing rates to the point of jeopardizing the private venture.

A bureaucracy's inability to work for anything other than profit is faced with the issue that is humans as a resource, or more notably the labor derived from them as described by Marx. In attempts to increase profits, it is common to see cuts to worker compensation in one manner or another. One significant way that this is seen is the compensation for labor failing to proportionately increase with the products of said labor (Solow, 2015). Weber's characterization of bureaucracies being self-sustaining is seen here in efforts made by private firms to maintain their top-down control over operations through means such as union busting, with some of the largest corporations fighting against any form of worker control or dependence (Boewe & Schulten, 2017). With profit as an exclusive motive, all else including the ability for workers to advocate for themselves must be dismissed.

A point brought up by George Ritzer regarding the expansion of the bureaucratic form is the control claimed by private organizations because of their structure. Ritzer describes the risks associated with human workers and writes "Technology that increases control over workers helps McDonaldized systems assure customers that their products and service will be consistent" (Ritzer, 1993). He suggests that automation is used as a threat that keeps workers in line and performing work that is acceptable enough to not warrant replacement.

As mentioned before, Weber's conception of bureaucracy appears to make concessions on behalf of workers with the notion that the successes of the systems are high enough to justify some drawbacks. Ritzer elaborates on this with his concept of McDonaldization and in his analysis, mentions the convenience of this system being ripe for automation. Ritzer is not uncritical of these bureaucratic systems, he does mention the environmental harm and alienation that this supply chain creates. I noticed however that he does not seem to readdress the automation in his critique. Perhaps this was to maintain a focus on rationalism, but I would like to focus on that, especially given Weber's seeming disregard for laborers as mentioned earlier. In Capital, Marx wrote about two relationships between commodities and money, one performed by capital owners in which money buys labor to create more money, and another performed by workers where labor is exchanged for money to obtain other commodities. In these relationships, labor is understood to be a necessary resource for accruing wealth. While these relationships are not proportionately beneficial, they depend on each other, and both parties walk out of the exchange having gained something. The capitalist gains capital, and the worker gains prolonged sustenance (Marx, 2015).

This symbiotic relationship depends on two conditions, the first being that the worker does not own capital beyond what it takes to sustain themselves, and the second being that the capitalist does not have the means of applying labor to products to turn them into commodities. Automation threatens the balance in this already tipping scale to the detriment of the laborers. With increasing levels of automation, the capitalist can outmode more workers until the only ones who remain are the maintenance for the automated systems. Productivity will either remain the same or go up, but the amount of labor being put into products will decrease significantly. As Weber and Ritzer described, there are benefits for capital owner to continue pursuing this route, primarily for cost efficiency and product consistency. Workers have no recourse as capital is accumulated by those with the head-start, and there is no guarantee that they will then be able to find the means to collect sustenance. Jon-Alrid Johannessen writes in his book *Automation, Capitalism and the End of the Middle Class*, “In the Fourth Industrial Revolution, technological developments resulted in some of the management, control, and coordination functions being automated and replacing the activities of middle managers. This resulted in a significant increase in productivity, but now without the need of more employees” (Johannessen, 2019). He elaborates to describe a predicted collapse of the middle class as the stratification needed to delegate many tasks is reduced by the progression of complex robotics or algorithms, depending on the use-case and the job being done.

Weber’s concept of bureaucracy has serves us well, especially in understanding the progression of system that require significant amounts of labor performed by individuals. However, to continue to provide for those who do not own capital, we need to begin looking at the future of capital. Automation is often a difficult topic to discuss because on one hand, it is clear the advantages that it can provide for us. The prospect of our needs being cared without significant effort for is enticing, but it is important to recognize that what is being automated is not public resources, and there is no precedent that would suggest private corporations would be so willing to distribute necessary resources freely should a labor surplus like this manifest. This requires us to analyze our understanding of property and what changes might be necessary to futureproof our economies to be able to handle ever-advancing technology.

References

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