

**Weber in cyberspace**

**The changing role of bureaucracy in an age of information technologies.**

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English translation from: 'Byråkratins roll i cyberrymden', in *Ikaros*, TEMA: Byråkrat in – en demokratisk paradox?, 1/2008. p. 6

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*The role of the state bureaucracy has changed considerably since the German sociologist Max Weber studied it, and hereby aimed the spotlight on the importance of bureaucracy for the modern societies. In this article, Giovanni Navarria examines how the use of modern information technology has changed the bureaucratic role in present-day society.*

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Max Weber described domination in modern states as *bureaucratic* – that is to say (in the words of Hannah Arendt), domination rests upon the fact of being “the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could be properly called *rule by Nobody*”.

### **The classical notion of bureaucracy**

Weber believed the administrative functions of modern states should ideally be organised according to a set of fixed principles:

- Bureaus are organised hierarchically from top to bottom, and officials are subject to the authority of their superior.
- Duties and activities are distributed according to a carefully defined division of tasks.
- Laws and administrative rules regulate jurisdictional areas and behaviour, the private preferences of officials are irrelevant.
- The decisions are taken by applying the carefully defined rules to the particular cases.
- The administration and procedures are strictly regulated by “written documents ('the files'), which are preserved in their original or draft form”.
- Civil servants are recruited based on the skills and qualifications criteria required by the appointment.

This infrastructure of power requires a vast workforce of various subordinated officials. That army of officials actively engaged in a *public* office, along with the respective apparatus of rules and procedures and *the files*, form what Weber calls a *bureaucracy*.

### **The technical revolution of bureaucracy**

The technological revolution of the last decade has spurred a radical transformation in the concepts and matrix of bureaucracy.

Neologisms such as e-Government, Virtual Government, or Gov 2.0 have become *buzz-terms* that mark the passage from an organisational milieu based on the complex bureaucracy described by Weber to a new mechanism structured around a more flexible and automated *virtuality*.

Within the technological framework of virtual bureaucracies, important decisions are still taken at the top of the hierarchy, agencies still play a fundamental role in the management of a country, and jurisdictional areas are still strictly regulated.

At the same time, however, coordination and interaction between agencies, allocation of duties, supervision and control mechanisms change radically. For example, most of the duties concerned

with control and monitoring, together with data-processing and cross-checking procedures, are automated and carried out in a faster and more reliable way, and in the long term they may be instantaneous.

The “files” are in electronic form, easy to transmit, share and maintain. Overall, information technology applied to governments' business improves officialdom by making the system faster and by diminishing significantly its inherited, embedded flaws. The nuisances frequently identified with bureaucracy – slowness and bad quality of services, chaos and inefficiency, at least from a user's perspective – are supposed to be reduced to a minimum or completely overcome.

This aspect – nuisance reduction – is one of the most important features of the whole process of electronic reorganisation of government administration. Embedded within it is an element of openness and reliability, alongside another quality – not the secrecy and exclusion inherent in Weber's “ideal-typical” model of bureaucracy, but the government's desire to please its customers, to become an impeccable service-provider.

### **Citizens in the virtual bureaucratic maze**

For an average citizen paying a fine or renewing a driving licence can easily become an exasperating odyssey through a bureaucratic web made of an intricate multitude of disorganised agencies not communicating with each other.

In the age of virtual government, such nuisance is set to become history. This aspiration is embodied in the United States president's management agenda of July 2001, which presents the aim of the US's e-government project: “to make better use of information technology [and allow its citizens] to be able to access government services and information within three 'clicks' when using the Internet.”

A government that satisfies its citizen's request within minutes is a dream that finally comes true. Nevertheless, this represents only one side of the coin.

The passage from the old bureaucratic state to a new form of virtual government in principle creates a more friendly relationship between the state and its subjects. But it also allows governments, in a seemingly inoffensive way, to lay down the foundations of a new, invisible mechanism of securing compliance.

In the high-tech society we increasingly inhabit, daily involvement with government is becoming increasingly technology-dependent. While being offered unprecedented opportunities to choose from a wide array of impressive and new efficient digital government' services, citizens are becoming, to say it with Michel Foucault, “governmentalized”.

Citizens in fact are learning to comply with the requests and the soft-diktats of the new environment, and – in the name of protection or in search of a better quality of life – giving up their right to privacy by allowing government to collect and retain data about every aspect of their lives. From their experience as consumers, they regard this as perfectly normal. As subjects always connected to the system, they become permanently surveyable and controllable: in the words of Gilles Deleuze, their *position* and *identity* are always known.

### **Is Big Brother watching us?**

In this new environment built on an impressive range of pervasive digital technologies – such as the internet, CCTV cameras, and relational databases –, at any moment, the government is able to ask any citizen questions such as “who are you?” “Where are you?” “What are you doing?” Moreover, Governments can promptly get the answers to those questions regardless of the citizen's readiness to share this information. Even more dangerously, citizens are rarely aware of being accessible data in a complex system of surveillance. They often willingly become part of the system by using it and inputting their data, hence turning themselves in trackable traces. Yet, the dangers of being an

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always identifiable object are never clearly understood, or when seen they are soon forgotten in the name of the benefits that the system brings with it. When we use e-government facilities to pay taxes or request benefits; or when we pay by credit cards, or use our cell phones, we become a new living creature, we become a two-being-entity: and the same time we turn into the happy customer and the amputated citizens. The holy civil principle of being invisible in a crowd, of being unidentifiable if one likes so, within such a structure is no longer an option. It is slowly and nicely sliced off. Too often unaware of the power-relations in which we have become enmeshed, we are left with no choice but becoming complying subjects of a power that is indeed “at its most effective when it is least observable” (Steven Lukes). More sadly, it seems clear that living within such a system implies - in the long term however - accepting those changes or becoming an outcast of the society that is built upon that system.

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