7 Bureaucracy as a Despotic System of Domination

Within modern societies, wherein legal-rational authority is institutionalized, bureaucratic administration has emerged, and civil liberties have not disappeared. Therefore, why doubt the future in this respect?

The answer is that bureaucratic organizations have shown increasing resistance to legal constraints, and have exhibited a growing tendency to hold to their own rules and regulations even where these have been explicitly forbidden by the courts. Further, few activities of modern public life have remained outside of bureaucratic organization. Therefore, one cannot be sure, at this early phase in the history of legal-bureaucratic authority, that such a fusion of conflicting legitimation processes can become viable.

We have already contrasted the kinds of rationality typical of legal authority and bureaucratic administration. We also suggested that though bureaucratic organizations exhibit administrative rationality, their political processes lean towards irrational mechanisms of consent-getting. These irrational mechanisms of legitimation are so ingrained in the organizational structure of bureaucracy that they will conflict with the rational processes of legitimation institutionalized within legal authority. With the extension and growth of bureaucratization into so many new spheres of public social action, these irrational processes of legitimation could become the dominant form of consent-getting within modern societies.

Let us look specifically at the irrational processes (or mechanisms) of legitimation which typify modern bureaucracies.

DEPERSONALIZED CHARISMA

In the ancient empires, such as Egypt, China, and Persia, depersonalized and manufactured charisma\(^1\) were brought to heady heights: clan charisma became blood aristocracy wherein individuals from royal clans monopolized all leadership offices; knights and priests became royal classes linked to royal clans; the office of kingship became surrounded by such fantastic manufactured charismatic effects that it came to be conceived of as divine; kings wore the most magnificent clothing, held magical sceptres and swords, sat on magnificent thrones, wore crowns and jewels, were surrounded with armies of knights, and had harems of wives for their pleasure.

R. M. Glassman, *The New Middle Class and Democracy in Global Perspective*  
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The court and the pomp surrounding the kings created a manufactured charismatic aura unsurpassed in history. The office charisma of the kingship invested its incumbent with awesome charisma, though the incumbent might actually be incompetent, retarded, psychotic, a child, or a woman (in a male-dominant society).²

How does depersonalized and manufactured charisma exhibit itself in modern bureaucracies?

In place of clan charisma, there is organizational charisma. That is, giant organizations – private or public – attempt to develop charisma of their own, such that any individual who works for that organization shares in the halo that the organization exudes.

Public relations departments, advertising departments, and personnel departments work specifically to create such images, using every modern manipulative technique at their disposal. Government bureaus, government agencies, and private corporations in most modern nations engage in such activities. Even the Pentagon advertises extensively, and makes public ‘parks’ out of its discarded aircraft carriers, submarines, and bombers.

Furthermore, modern bureaucracies exhibit a hierarchy of carefully defined offices. The incumbents of these offices are invested with a certain amount of authority simply by their occupancy of the particular office in question. Now, sociologists have done many studies showing that there may be certain ‘natural’ leaders, or old-timers to whom people defer, or approach, when they want to get things done. The ‘informal’ leadership structure exists,³ and I do not wish to down-play its effect on bureaucratic operations.

The hierarchical authority structure of bureaucracies does, however, endow the incumbents of superior offices with a kind of depersonalized office charisma. If the incumbent of such an office is minimally competent and holds such an office for a fair amount of time, that person may gain a certain amount of charismatic aura.

Middle, and near-top managers, bureau heads, executive directors, captains and colonels, bishops and cardinals will gain authority beyond their personal attributes through office incumbency. The ‘natural’ leaders and old-timers may resent them, but their power and the deference paid to their power is backed by the hierarchy and accepted by the line workers in the chain of command.

The point is that a manufactured charismatic aura comes to surround the elite bureaucrats – especially in terms of their image to the middle and lower managers. In fact, we find a remarkable paradox here. That is, on the one hand, bureaucrats attempt to remain faceless and anonymous, avoiding the kind of publicity that electoral politicians and swashbuckling