

Weberian Bureaucracy

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Summary

The term Weberian bureaucracy refers to Max Weber's (1864–1920) ideal type (or model) of rational bureaucracy, published in *Economy and Society* posthumously in 1921/22 by his wife Marianne Weber. His ideal type of bureaucracy consists of a number of organizational features of administrative order. At the ideal type's core lies a hierarchically structured, professional, rule-bound, impersonal, meritocratic, and disciplined body of public servants who possess a specific set of competences and who operate outside the sphere of politics. An ideal type is an analytical construct against which to contrast empirical observations. Weber never meant it to be a descriptive nor a prescriptive account of how bureaucracy should be. Weberian bureaucracy is part of his broader sociology and must therefore be understood as part of its methodological, theoretical, and empirical context. The model is not an isolated concept; it derives from Weber's historical analysis of modernization and the emergence of the rational state, and serves as the epitome of it.

To Weber, modernization and people's corresponding transformed worldviews were preconditions for rational rule and inevitably led to rational bureaucracy. Weber's rationalization thesis draws from his sociology of rule, which comprises three types of authority: charismatic, traditional, and rational. Weber wrote in dynamic historical times. His *bürgerlicher* (bourgeois) background and his politically liberal stance contributed to the model's normative objective of keeping administration out of democratic politics. The model received immense scholarly attention. Due to its simplicity and how catchy it was, the model was prone to become a stereotype, which is exactly what happened. In post–World War II public administration literature, Weber's model was made into the scapegoat for unfashionable bureaucracy based on hierarchy and red tape. The model's reception was not only negative because of de-contextualized reading and misinterpretation. There were also serious criticisms regarding the model itself, including claims of empirical inaccuracy. Twenty-first-century attempts to launch a neo-Weberian approach in Public Administration have not yet eclipsed the stereotypical use of Weber.

Weber's legacy as an intellectual giant of 20th-century social sciences is best served if 21st-century Public Administration scholarship treats the model as what it actually is—an integral part of a historical scholarly masterpiece, not an analytical or normative guideline for the study and design of early 21st-century administrative praxis.

What Does Weberian Bureaucracy Mean?

The term Weberian bureaucracy refers to Max Weber's (1864–1920) ideal type of bureaucratic order as a precondition for legal rule. This entry focuses on Weber's intellectual contribution and its reception rather than the colloquial understanding of the term as a descriptive or normative account of an empirical phenomenon. This article will clarify that the use of the term as a synonym for traditional bureaucracy is a matter of Weber's reception rather than his writing.

In Weber's model, the different levels of rule are hierarchically arranged in a system of superordination and subordination. Administrative procedures are based on written rules, an impersonal order, and a clear division of labor. The professional appointment of bureaucrats is based on qualification and performance. A vocational ethos characterizes bureaucrats as specialized, full-time professionals. They share an esprit de corps, and their mode of interaction with both policy principals and the public must be neutral. In view of this, their household must be strictly separated from their profession, which in turn requires that they be employed and receive a pension. Considering these principles, one notes that they refer to both formal organizational structures and bureaucratic personnel (Rosser, 2018, p. 1013; Weber, 1980, pp. 124–130, 825–827).

From the post–World War II era on, Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy has been one of the most referenced concepts in Public Administration on both sides of the Atlantic. However, the immense number of partial citations of Weber, or extractions from his work, begs the question of how many scholars have actually examined his work in its entirety. In fact, most literature views Weber's model as largely flawed and portrays the use of his ideal type of bureaucracy as a cheap cue for an old-fashioned hierarchical and a stubbornly inflexible form of administrative organization.

These criticisms do not do justice to Weber's writings on bureaucracy for at least three reasons. First, many authors mistake Weber's model for either a description of bureaucracy or a prescription of how bureaucracy should be. Both interpretations are wrong considering Weber's methodological approach to the ideal type. Second, merely extracting citations strips the concept from its broader theoretical and analytical underpinnings that are rooted in Weber's analysis of the historical process of rationalization and his sociology of rule (*Herrschaftssoziologie*). Third, Weber's model draws on a historical-empirical context, which had an effect on Weber's political beliefs.

This article aims to go beyond a mere presentation of Weber's model of bureaucracy and to put it into a context that allows for a deeper understanding of its analytical and normative value. The first section presents the bureaucracy model based on Weber's original writings. The sections that follow first explain Weber's methodological approach to the ideal type, without which the bureaucracy model would remain a mere list of organizational features, and second, present Weber's sociology of rule, which informed his historical analysis. Thirdly, they turn to Weber's historical analysis of the “disenchantment of the world”² and the emergence of the rational state that forms the conceptual heart of the Weberian model of bureaucracy.

Afterwards, the article discusses Weber's historical context and political background, which informed the model. The basics for understanding Weber's model of bureaucracy having been provided, the next section traces its reception, from its importation into the U.S. social scientific canon to the call for a neo-Weberian bureaucracy in the 2010s. The article concludes by questioning whether the early 21st-century readership should conceive of Weberian bureaucracy as a historical normative concept or whether it is an ahistorical analytical tool that continues to be useful.

Weber's Ideal Type of Rational Bureaucracy

Weberian bureaucracy conveys the features that Weber enlisted to form an ideal type of rational bureaucracy as the defining characteristic of the rational state based on rational rule. Greater insights into the concepts of ideal type and the rational state and rule will follow this section's discussion of ideal-type rational bureaucracy.

The fact that Weberian bureaucracy and the ideal type of rational bureaucracy have become standard terms should not overshadow the fact that Weber does not actually present a concise concept. Instead, he provides a list of characteristics that are arguably neither complete nor coherent in themselves. Höpfl (2006, pp. 10–11), for example, criticizes this list for being inconsistent and unconnected. Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy is best understood as "a checklist of distinctive criteria" (Sager & Rosser, 2009, p. 1137). Weber presents his model through various instances, most importantly in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Economy and Society, Weber, 1980), published posthumously by his wife Marianne in 1922. Weber's oeuvre was published in a complete, critical edition completed in 2020 comprising 47 volumes (Baier et al., 1984–2020).³ *Economy and Society* includes two texts on bureaucracy. A compact discussion in part I, chapter 3 (§3–5) refers to the concepts of "rational" or "legal" rule (*Herrschaft*), discussed in more detail in the section "Weber's Typology of Rule (*Herrschaft*)." Part III, chapter 6 is an extended version of these concepts that Weber wrote between 1910 and 1914. This text is unfinished and unrevised and lacks a broader theoretical context (Höpfl, 2006, p. 10, referring to Mommsen, 1974, p. 16, fn. 22; and Keith Tribe's introduction to Hennis, 1988, pp. 12–13). The inaccuracy of Talcott Parsons' 1947 translation compels us to employ Keith Tribe's newer translation of *Economy and Society* (Weber, 2019) (for the history of translations of *Economy and Society*, cf. Keith Tribe's introduction to his translation, Weber, 2019, pp. 1–73, for some instances, this entry relies on the authors' own translation of the original text). Apart from *Economy and Society*, Weber wrote about bureaucracy in his political writings, namely in *Parlament und Regierung im neugeordneten Deutschland* (Weber, 1918; Parliament and Government in the Newly Ordered Germany), and *Politik als Beruf* (Weber, 1992; Politics as Vocation, 1918–1919). Thus, there are several accounts of Weberian bureaucracy, and they differ in their order and the selection of their criteria.

Weber's most important characteristic of bureaucracy is that it is separate from politics. That is, bureaucracy is an organizational body that is distinct from (democratic) politics that dominates decision-making. Exercising legal authority requires a bureaucratic staff that executes the day-to-day routine of administrative affairs and follows an abstract order that is separate from politics. Weber (2019) summarizes the basic characteristics of the bureaucratic order in two central paragraphs in section 2 of chapter 3 in *Economy and Society*. In §3, Weber writes about rational rule:

The basic categories of rational rule are therefore

1. the continuing rule-governed conduct of official functions within
2. a sphere of competence that covers
 - a. a substantive separation of duties based on a division of labour
 - b. with assignation of the required powers of command and
 - c. with definite demarcation of the means of compulsion probably required, and the conditions for their use. An operation ordered in this manner will be called a “public authority” (Behörde).

(Weber, 2019, p. 344)

Having stated the rule-boundedness of rational legal authority and the need for the respective vessel to exercise it, Weber continues by describing the characteristics of the “administrative organ” in §4:

The purest type of legal rule is that effected through a bureaucratic administrative staff. Only the organisation’s director holds his position of rule either by virtue of appropriation, election, or having been designated as successor. But even the terms of his authority are also legal “competences.” In the purest type, the totality of the administrative staff is composed of individual officials (monocracy, in contrast to “collegiality,” which will be discussed later). These officials

1. are personally free and observe only substantive official obligations,
2. are placed in a fixed official hierarchy,
3. have defined official competences,
4. are appointed by contract, hence in principle on the basis of free selection, and
5. possess a specialized qualification—in the most rational case, qualified through examination and certified as such—and are appointed rather than elected,
6. are remunerated in money by fixed salaries, for the most part with a right to a pension; are liable to dismissal by a superior in some circumstances (particularly in private business); always have the right to resign; [receive a] salary that is graded mainly according to position in the hierarchy (...). That payment should be appropriate to social rank (...),
7. treat the official appointment as their sole or principal occupation,
8. see themselves as having a career, being promoted according to age or performance, or both, depending on their superiors’ judgement,
9. work in complete “separation from administrative means” and without any personal right to the post occupied,
10. are subordinate to rigorous and uniform official discipline and supervision.

(Weber, 2019, pp. 347–348)

As many scholars highlight, Weber's model was not without precedents. Hegel's notion of bureaucracy, outlined in the *Philosophy of Right*, ranks as the most prominent of these (Hegel, 1952; cf. Gale & Hummel, 2003, pp. 409–418; Jackson, 1986, pp. 139–157; Knapp, 1986, pp. 599–606; Shaw, 1992, pp. 381–389; Spicer, 2004, pp. 97–102; Welty, 1976). Knapp (1986, p. 601) writes that “many figures who informed Weber's sociology were powerfully influenced by Hegel even as they contested Hegelian positions.” More concretely, Michael Spicer (2004, p. 101) states that, “a large part of the similarities in the ideas of Hegel and Weber about bureaucracy and the state may be traced [...] to their shared consciousness of Prussian history and experience.” Hegel based important passages of his *Philosophy of Right* on the 1794 *Allgemeines Landrecht für die Preussischen Staaten* (Welty, 1976, p. 3), and Weber (1980, p. 494) was aware of and appreciated this legal document. Sager and Rosser (2009) state that the empirical ground shared by Weber and Hegel explains the striking similarities between Weber's model and Woodrow Wilson's (1856–1924) concept of bureaucracy, which the latter fleshed out in his famous article, “The Study of Administration” (Wilson, 1887).

Hegel and Weber both believed in a formalized, professionalized, hierarchically organized, meritocratic form of organization of public administration. Hegel envisioned a new class of public servants that would serve the common will, rather than the rulers of that will. Like Weber, he expected that the professional public servant would be content with their position and that the education of public servants would ensure their consciousness of right. Although, like Weber, he foresaw the possibility of self-interested public servants that could foment a self-perpetuating bureaucracy (Hegel, 1952, §295),⁴ he believed that a hierarchical bureaucratic structure could restrict the power of the administrative apparatus.

The Model's Underpinnings

Weber's model is not an isolated stroke of genius; it is an integral part of his wider conception of history and the society of his time. To embed Weber's model into his overall thinking, this section first presents the ideal type as methodological notion, which is what the model of bureaucracy was meant to be.

Weber's Ideal Type as Methodological Tool

Weber considered his model of bureaucracy to be an ideal type. It is important to understand this analytical tool to understand his model. Weber (1982/1904) questioned the possibility of finding true objective or metaphysical meaning in cultural and social processes, and he thus did not believe that research would lead to the discovery of universal empirical laws.

Notwithstanding, he believed that sensible causal assumptions and carefully conducted empirical studies would allow scholars to arrive at the same results. To understand complex actions and processes, Weber proposed the use of the ideal type: a meaningfully adequate (*sinnadäquat*) and unified analytical construct (Weber, 1980, pp. 9–10). Analyzing reality against the ideal type would allow for an interpretative understanding (*deutendes Verstehen*) of a concrete empirical observation by comparing its differences with the initially constructed yardstick (Raadschelders, 2010, p. 306; Rosser, 2018, p. 1013).

Weber's widow, Marianne Weber, elucidated the method.

The Ideal-Type is not a presentation of reality, but it aims at providing the presentation with a clear means of expression. It is not a hypothesis, but it aims at directing the formation of hypotheses. It is not historical reality or a scheme into which it can be integrated, but a border concept by which reality is measured to elucidate certain significant components of its substance and with which it is compared. As distinct from generic concepts, then, Ideal-Types are means of cognition, not goals of cognition. Because “the eternally flowing stream of culture” always gives the eternally youthful historical disciplines ever new ways of formulating problems, new [case studies] always have to be created and the existing ones have to be continually corrected. Historical cognition remains in constant flux. That is why it would be senseless to try to integrate it definitively into a complete system of concepts from which reality is to be derived ... frequently people read into them not only something that exists but also something that ought to exist—namely, that aspect of theirs which is of permanent value from the viewpoint of the historian. But as soon as this extra- scientific element is present in the application of a concept, this concept loses its cognitive value, for the theoretical value relatedness (Wertbeziehung) and practical value judgment (Wertbeurteilu[n]g) intermingle imperceptibly. Then the Ideal-Types [case studies] change from logical aids to ideals by which the extra-scientific significance of concrete phenomena is measured. The result is logically untidy telescoping of the subjective and the objective, of believing and knowing, which diminishes the cognitive value of a historical presentation.

(Weber, 1988b, pp. 314–315, quoted in Cochrane, 2018a)

Weber believed that despite the choice and parameters set by the inquirer, it was possible to conduct research with a value-free outcome. Weber did not intend the term “ideal,” despite its overtone, to suggest a normatively exemplary, nor did he intend for his ideal-type bureaucracy to be empirically exemplary (Weber, 1982/1904, p. 200). Weber (translated by Shils and Finch, 1949, p. 90) emphatically claimed that the ideal type:

is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description. [...] An ideal-type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct (Gedankenbild). In its conceptual purity, this mental construct (Gedankenbild) cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality. It is a utopia. (1949, p. 90)

As Weber himself indicates, he did not seek to describe the German administrative apparatus of his time, although his work may have been inspired by the contemporary Wilhelminian Reich (Rosser, 2018, p. 1014).

Weber's Typology of Rule (Herrschaft)

Weber's theory of bureaucracy builds on his tripartite view of traditional, charismatic, and legal rule (Herrschaft) (1952), and this background demonstrates his primary emphasis on public organizations (Derlien, 1999, p. 58). While Weber acknowledged that these authority types had always existed simultaneously and in various composites, he favored employing the concept of an unambiguous ideal type to "analyze such combinations in terms of their legal, traditional or charismatic elements" (Bendix, 1959, p. 296). For Weber, authority meant that orders would be followed by a specific group of people, while legitimacy was defined as people's willingness to obey (Rosser, 2018).

In §2 of section 2, chapter 3 in *Economy and Society*, Weber writes:

There are three pure types of legitimate rule. The validity of their legitimacy can be secured primarily

1. in a rational manner: a belief in the legality of statutory orders and the right of those appointed to exercise rule to give directions (legal rule); or
2. in a traditional manner: an everyday belief in the sanctity of long-established traditions and the legitimacy of those whose authority derives from these traditions (traditional rule); or finally,
3. in a charismatic manner: the exceptional sanctity or heroic qualities or exemplary character of a person, and of the orders that this person proclaims or creates (charismatic rule).

Institutionalized rule requires legitimacy. Less generally speaking, to ensure people's belief in its legitimacy, an authority had to "establish and cultivate a belief in its legitimacy" (Schreurs, 2000, p. 55). Weber's ideal type specifically sought to understand "how the exercise of Herrschaft influences individual freedom" (Bartels, 2009, p. 458). An ideal-type perspective views belief in an authority's legitimacy as rational or irrational. Charismatic and traditional authorities were built on irrational beliefs, while legal authority was built on rational beliefs. Holders of irrational beliefs do not consciously question the ruler's authority. Instead, people obey their leaders due to their belief in the leader's wisdom, magical power, or, in the case of traditional authority, out of personal loyalty to the leader's inherited status (Weber, 1980, pp. 122–124).

Weber (1980, p. 122; 1952, p. 106) considered legal authority as a "system of rules that is applied judicially and administratively" according to certain principles and that applies to all members of a group (Bendix, 1959, p. 294), and viewed bureaucracy as the purest form of legal authority. From both an intra-organizational and an extra-organizational perspective, he conceptualized legal-rational bureaucracy as the most rational form of political authority (Bendix, 1959, pp. 294–296).

Legal authority was built on value-rational (wertrational) or purpose-rational (zweckrational) motives. In Weber's view, bureaucrats possessed value-rational motives stemming from a conscious belief in the intrinsic value of following rules (Weber, 1980, p. 12). Their obedience was not tied to a person, instead, they relied on a legally specified, impersonal, and therefore objective order. This obedience developed over the course of the rationalization of the state until their maxim of conduct was fully governed by laws and regulations.

As long as bureaucrats did not have a political affiliation, such as belonging to a political party, during their period of service, legal regulations could continue along the administrative chain of command in order to reflect the will of political leaders and their electorate. He considered citizens' motives to originate from a purpose-rational consideration of ends, means, and side effects. Citizens looked to bureaucracies, believed them to be legitimate, and obeyed them in anticipation of success, because of those bureaucracies' perceived dedication to the "rule of law" before which all citizens are held equal, at least in juridical terms" (Barberis, 2011, p. 15).

Weber's typology of rule is inseparably interlinked with his historical analysis of modern statehood. For Weber, the rational belief in legal authority was the result of historical processes that culminated in rational bureaucracy as the core condition for the rational modern state.

Weber's Analysis of the Emergence of the Rational State

For Weber (1980, pp. 822–824), modern statehood was a result of the gradual development of Western political history from feudalism to absolutism, ending in the modern bureaucratic state. He believed that this development represented a process of "modernization" that permeated all aspects of human life. For Weber, the capitalistic system was a result of the modernization of the economy, while bureaucracy was the result of the modernization of the state, and he viewed these processes as sharing a causal link (Weber, 1952, p. 108; 1980, p.825). He believed that these economic and political rationalizations went hand in hand with a transformation of people's worldviews (Weber, 1990, p. 209), and viewed the "Protestant ethic" as a driving factor in man's increasingly conscious desire to control the world. This *Entzauberung der Welt* ("disenchantment of the world"; Weber, 1990, p. 209) had resulted in the "elimination of both magical and spiritual forces from the picture of the world" (Shils, 1987, p. 561). Without these forces, people's views became more accepting of the formalization of the law, which allowed for the objective domination of people over people.

Weber viewed this *Entzauberung* to be irreversible. Legally formalizing social norms facilitated economic and political rationalizations by providing the state and capitalist firms with legal predictability and certainty (Treiber, 2007, p. 131). Moreover, Weber also believed that "capitalist economic development (facilitated and most developed in Protestant areas) created the burgher class whose existence was both a catalyst and a necessary condition for democracy. The emphasis within Protestantism on individual responsibility furthered the emergence of democratic values" (Lipset, 1959, p. 85).

In contrast to Hegel, for instance, Weber (1988a, p. 517) had no teleological notion of history. Weber perceived that notion as "a contravention against the research method, if we look at a 'cultural stage' as something else than a mere term or statement."⁵ Instead, Weber applied ideal-type historical stages in order to analyze Western history neutrally (Treiber, 2007, p.136) and to explore the "origins of western rationality and the reasons for its absence or variations in other cultures" (Swidler, 1973, p. 35). As Ali Mazrui (1968, p. 69) points out, "the idea of analyzing and classifying nations on the basis of the stage of modernization [...] has long-standing historical connections with a tradition that goes back to social Darwinism and beyond." While Weber used Darwinist terminology in his early work (Weikart, 1993, pp. 478– 479), his description of the state and rational bureaucracy contains more technical metaphors that relate to mechanisms, machines, or apparatus (cf. Anter, 1995, pp. 210–217; Treiber, 2007, p. 130; Weber, 1972, pp. 321–323; Weber, 1980, pp. 570, 682). These views depart from Darwin in that their nature is more technical than organic.

Weber's fully developed and modern state takes the form of a political corporate group (*politischer Anstaltsbetrieb*) with a corresponding administrative body that has a monopoly on

the legitimate use of physical force to execute laws and regulations (Weber, 1980, pp. 39, 815). In an ideal-type perspective of this end state, state bureaucracy emerges as the most rational manner of exercising authority and is therefore inevitable (Weber, 1980, pp. 668– 689). As the sociopolitical order becomes institutionalized and impersonalized, the bureaucracy becomes the best technical instrument for organizing government and the greatest provider of predictability, precision, discipline, stringency, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, unity, strict subordination, speed, reduction of friction, and reduction of material and personal costs (Weber, 1980, p. 128). Despite this inevitability and height of rationalization, Weber's later political writings acknowledge that the rationality of the modern bureaucracy could prove dangerous.

Weber's Historical Context and Political Beliefs

Weber was a political thinker and was strongly inclined to comment on contemporary politics, but never assumed a formal political role as an incumbent. He was a member of the *bürgerliche Klassen* (bourgeoisie) and described himself as such (Kaube, 2014, Erstes Kapitel: Ein Mitglied der bürgerlichen Klassen). While Weber subscribed to the bourgeois ideal, he himself did not attain the attributes that were customary for the individuals of this class.

Jürgen Kaube (2014, Erstes Kapitel: Ein Mitglied der bürgerlichen Klassen) summarizes Weber's lifetime's achievements with the words "No book [besides his two qualification theses for the dissertation and the habilitation], no children, no war, no wealth, no influence." Kaube (2014) states that the discrepancy of belonging to the bourgeoisie while at the same time failing to exhibit its outer features was one of Weber's main drivers for examining the emergence of the bourgeois society he lived in and felt part of. While his political position on nationalism shifted during his life, from chauvinism in his thirties to a liberal stance in his later life, he remained a liberal, and acknowledged the virtues and freedom German democratization had brought to the bourgeoisie. This political belief not only marked his sociology in general, but his model of bureaucracy in particular.⁶

In his later works, Weber (1980, p. 572) acknowledged the possibility of modern bureaucracy becoming too powerful, and he was ambivalent about this power. Despite at times being wary of the influence of modern public administration (Ringer, 2004, pp. 220–224; Treiber, 2007, pp. 121–147), he believed modern bureaucracy to be the only rational and inevitable form of organization (Ringer, 2004, p. 221). To reconcile these views by ensuring the efficient working of the state while limiting the influence of public servants, he proposed a strict separation between politics and administration. In his works, *Politics as a Vocation* (1919) and *Economy and Society*, he distinguishes between politicians and public servants. Politicians are involved in the legislative and the electoral process and they should work to fulfill their duties according to an ethic of responsibility. Public servants, on the other hand, were not to include their own perspectives in the execution of their tasks, which should be conducted neutrally and in obedience to their hierarchy, to the point of self-denial. In his words, Weber believed that, "the passionate struggle for power—'ira et studium'—is the politician's element, whereas the bureaucrat should strive to execute legal orders dutifully, without anger and passion —'sine ira et studio.'"⁷ To the German scholar, as Patrick Overeem (2005, p. 316) concisely sums up, "it was essential that administration stay out of politics."⁸

Reception

Weber's impact on modern social sciences is immeasurable. While he only published two books—his dissertation and his habilitation theses—during his lifetime, his wife edited and published his other work posthumously. She also minted his legacy as a larger-than-life figure by publishing his intellectual biography six years after his passing. However, it took Talcott Parsons' English translation of *Economy and Society* (Weber, 1947) to make Weber an international giant.

Weber's reception in Europe was broad and referred to his oeuvre in full. U.S. scholars were more selective. While there were early attempts to identify the extent to which organizations corresponded to the Weberian model, such as those of Constat (1958) and Udy (1959), Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy soon became a standard reference in Public Administration. Reception history strongly emphasizes the use of Weber's model as stereotype for bureaucracy in the U.S. literature (Rosser, 2018). Sager et al. (2018) speak of "Weber's Frosty Greeting in the U.S. Literature" (Sager et al., 2018, p. 55) and the "creative misinterpretation" (Sager et al., 2018, p. 65) of his work.

The literature provides different explanations for the critical reception of Weber's model. One important factor was the partial inaccuracy of Parsons' translation. An often-quoted example is the translation of Weberian "formal rationality" as "efficiency." Parsons' (Weber, 1947) translation states that bureaucracy is:

from a purely technical point of view, capable of attaining the highest degree of efficiency and is in this sense formally the most rational known means of carrying out imperative control over human beings.

(Henderson & Parsons, 1997, p. 337)

However, Weber's original German texts do not include the term "efficiency" (Effizienz; Derlien, 1999, p. 57; Gajduschek, 2003, p. 710). Weber (1980, p. 128) instead employed the ideal-type concept to argue that bureaucracy was "formally the most rational form of exercising domination [Herrschaft]" and that therefore it was "technically superior over any other form of organization" (Weber, 1980, p. 570). Weber's controversial reception, therefore, could be blamed on a misrepresentation of Weber's terminology, in addition to his versatile and often complex use of the concepts of rationality and rationalization behind the ideal type of bureaucracy (Kalberg, 1980; Schreurs, 2000, pp. 49–62).

Raadschelders provides an even broader root of misinterpretation:

Weber's labored (yet precise and subtle) writing style, combined with the enormous amount of historical detail, may have contributed to the fact that Weber's ideas are stereotyped more often than not. Many scholars have not bothered to read Weber's extensive historical analyses and simply focus their discussions on, for instance, the inadequacy of the ideal type as a methodological instrument and as an interpretation of reality.

(Raadschelders, 2010, p. 306)

However, critique stemmed not only from misreading of the text, and it also was not limited to the reception by Weber's U.S. audience. Early on, organization sociology criticized Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy for its empirical inadequacy. Renate Mayntz (1971/1965) elaborates on this criticism by claiming that Weber's conceptualization lacks a "consideration of informal elements in the organization, that is, those deviations from and additions to the informal target scheme that arise from the social nature of the members, their personal values and needs" (Mayntz, 1971/1965, p. 29, trans.).

More concretely, Weber's conceptualization of the ideal type found resistance among organizational theorists, who, as Mayntz (1971/1965; summarized here by Raadschelders, 2000, p. 113) writes, could not establish "whether the various characteristics of bureaucracy were positively correlated." Moreover, criticisms saw Weber's view of reality as incomplete due to his "lack of attention for informal structures and dimensions," and "notions about goal- decision processes and relations to the environment" (Raadschelders, 2000, p. 113).

Individuals' participation and ties to the organization were also overlooked in the ideal type. These criticisms are aptly summarized by March and Simon (1958, p. 37) may serve as an example of this line of criticism when stating: "He is not exceptionally attentive to the character of the human organism."

Weber remained a standard reference in postwar public administration. It is worth noting that Weberian thought has also traveled beyond the Western world, finding specific interest in China. Tsai (2020; also see Rothstein, 2015) provides an overview of the Chinese reception of Weber's administrative writings. Further, Weber's work has received intellectual reception in Hong Kong (Wong, 2013) Pakistan (Hashmi & Shuja, 2020), Egypt (Al-Shyyab, 2020) and Saudi Arabia (Al-Wagdani, 2010). Despite widespread skepticism, there has also positive feedback on his model. A notable case is that of Charles T. Goodsell's *The Case for Bureaucracy*. Goodsell's (1983) book targeted a U.S. readership and sought to argue that bureaucracy was crucial to a functioning democratic system. He emphasized that the public servants involved therein were essential, not excessive or imprudent and did not threaten citizens' liberties. He viewed the American administrative system as having largely developed along the lines of Weberian bureaucracy (Goodsell, 1983, pp. 2, 6), and therefore claimed that U.S. bureaucracy "inescapably involves defending the use of Weber's model" (Goodsell, 1983, p. 2). Goodsell realized that there would be a backlash against his polemic. Many students of public administration had already criticized Weberian bureaucracy as "unworkable and even immoral," and he knew his argument would challenge "well-known and long-worshiped academic theory" and antagonize intellectuals, especially market-oriented economists, functional sociologists, policy analysts, and political theorists. These intellectuals took especial offense at what they viewed (erroneously, according to Goodsell, 1983, pp. 7–8) as the model's limited market and organizational understanding. They interpreted the model as lacking a view of market-competition and profit-base incentives, pathological behavioral patterns, or organizational dysfunctions, and also considered it as failing to take into account bureaucrats' resistance to policy change, and the dangerous political influence of the bureaucratic apparatus (Rosser, 2018).

Early 21st-century calls for a so-called neo-Weberian bureaucracy build upon a similar normative stance. These calls stem from Weber's enduring relevance, especially for European scholars of public administration and management. The neo-Weberian state as conceived by Christopher Pollitt and Geert Bouckaert (2004) originally emerged as a description of reality, not as a normative model. Through a normative lens, neo-Weberian advocates have used the approach to criticize New Public Management (NPM) doctrines, which allegedly provide a universal approach to the organization of the public sector (Eymeri-Douzans & Pierre, 2011, p. 1; Olsen, 2006, p. 16; Ongaro, 2015, p. 108; Spanou, 2003, p. 112).

The implications of neo-Weberian bureaucracy, however, go beyond the actual bureaucracy model. It uses the state, regardless of its governing style and level of involvement, as its point of departure for administrative reforms in Europe. Advocates of this approach view public administration as an essential part of political domination and representative democracy (Spanou, 2003, p. 109). Jon Pierre and Bo Rothstein (2011, p. 121) further explain that the state remains an important source of trust in society due to "its legality, impartiality, and accountability." Questioning the central role of the state is on a par with proposing an alternative conception of democracy and its basic principles. With no alternative in sight, representative democracy remains the "legitimizing element within the state apparatus that may be complemented, but not supplanted, by a range of consultation devices" (Ongaro, 2015, p. 112). Moreover, in seeking to meet the domestic and international challenges of globalization, climate change, migration, and technology, states cannot merely rely on international collaboration and supranational steering. European states still require "the political, organizational, and managerial capacity to deal with domestic and international problems" (Dunn & Miller, 2007, p. 351).

Wolfgang Seibel (2010) opposes this basically positive account of neo-Weberian bureaucracy by highlighting the integrative role of modern administrative practice. He states that Weberian thinking is not per se incompatible with the notion of public authorities organizing clientele participation and consequently co-opting stakeholders, providing for symbolic sense making and creating patterns of identity so that "public administration . . . works as a political integrator in its own right" (Seibel, 2010, p. 719). He posits, however, that Weber's ultimately negative conception of the political role of bureaucracy inhibits analytical engagement with the inclusive function of public administration in modern societies.

What Should We Do With Weber in Early 21st-Century Public Administration?

The year 2020 saw a surge of publications about Weber on the occasion of the centenary of his death (e.g., Albrow, 2020; Anter & Bruhns, 2020; D'Anselmi, 2020; Dash & Padhi, 2020). In one of them, Drechsler (2020, p. 219) summarized the significance of Weber's writing for administrative science as follows: "One can think with or against Weber in [P]ublic [A]dministration, but by and large, not really without him." Weberian bureaucracy, in short, is a checklist of organizational characteristics:

The rational public administration is based on written rules, an impersonal, hierarchical order, and a clear division of labor. Furthermore, bureaucrats are appointed to administrative offices because of their skills (meritocracy) and not because of their ancestry. The public servants' education is important and bureaucrats are supposed to be highly specialized professionals. Also, a career in the public sector guarantees both a fixed salary and a pension.

(Sager & Rosser, 2009, p. 1137)

The appealing simplicity of this list makes it easy to grasp while, at the same time, making it prone to stereotyping and consequently to misinterpretation. Both have occurred in the case of Weber's model.

How can one understand this model in the early 21st century? Can one employ it as the analytical tool Weber intended, with his method of the ideal type? Or does it have a guiding normative virtue for designing early 21st-century bureaucracies as, for example, the neo-Weberian approach insinuates?

The analytical use of Weber's model apparently remains. Administrative scholars employ the ideal type to contrast and delineate empirical findings—as Rothstein (2015) does with Chinese administrative organization—and new concepts—as Höpfl (2006) does with the notion of post-bureaucracy. However, its use as an analytical yardstick is somewhat impaired by the fact that, as Höpfl (2006, p. 10) points out, the model lacks conceptual consistency for serving as a clear analytical point of reference. In empirical terms, Cochrane (2018b) points to a number of weaknesses in Weber's model that would have rendered it inadequate for the analysis of the historical Prussian bureaucracy. It is thus critical to consider Weber's normative subtext when employing the model.

A clear example is the contrast between his ideal-type portrayal of passionate politicians and neutral bureaucrats and the actual goings-on in the *Beamtenherrschaft* of the Wilhelminian Reich, where bureaucrats could leverage the advantages of asymmetric information to advance their own political agendas. Bureaucrats could also ensure the pursuit of their own interests by establishing administrative practices that would distort policies in a direction that diverged from their initial legislative intent. Weber acknowledged the existence of these abuses of power and, especially in his later political writings, promoted stronger leadership, including the strengthening of parliament and complementing the parliamentary selection of political leaders with plebiscitary elections (Barberis, 2011, pp. 16–17; Ringer, 2004, pp. 220–224; Treiber, 2007, pp. 138–140). Weber did, therefore, express normative ambivalence toward the future of state bureaucracy, and this ambivalence was overlooked in the 20th-century reception of his work (Sager et al., 2018, p. 54).

In light of Drechsler's (2020) statement about there being no public administration thinking without Weber, it appears that there are plenty of reasons to reject him both analytically and empirically. However, as the case against Weber has been made through his stereotypical reception, one may be inclined to ask whether this reception stemmed from the fact that his model ultimately served neither its analytical purpose as an idea type nor any prescriptive purpose as a normative orientation. However, the future reading of this model should abstain from rejecting it outright without reflecting on his context.

Weber's ideal type of bureaucracy is part of a major oeuvre of modern sociology. *Economy and Society* is a fundamental work, and one on which much of 20th-century social science was built. Weberian bureaucracy should be treated as a part of that historical work, both analytically and normatively. Weber's intellectual legacy is not that he provides public administration scholarship with a model that continues to be valid. It is rather that Weber's model influences the way bureaucracy is viewed to this day, namely as the epitome of the modern state. Conceiving Weberian bureaucracy as an important historical and intellectual piece of work does more justice to its legacy than endlessly debating its usefulness or applicability.

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Notes

1. The phrase *Entzauberung der Welt* can be translated as “disenchantment of the world.” According to Shils (1987, p. 561), “Max Weber regarded the *Entzauberung der Welt* as the elimination of both magical and spiritual forces from the picture of the world; he regarded the refusal to acknowledge these powers as a culmination of one current of the process of rationalization.”
2. For full information on the Max Weber-Gesamtausgabe (MWG), see <https://mwg.badw.de/das-projekt.html> <<https://mwg.badw.de/das-projekt.html>> (in German).
3. In Hegel’s work, it is customary to refer to paragraphs rather than page numbers. These are the same in every edition of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*, which makes it easier to, for instance, compare the German original with English translations.
4. Originally, Weber (1988a, p. 517) wrote: “und ein Verstoß gegen die Forschungsmethode ist es, wenn wir eine ‘Kulturstufe’ als etwas anderes als einen Begriff ansehen, sie wie ein reales Wesen nach der Art der Organismen, mit denen die Biologie zu tun hat, oder wie eine Hegelsche ‘Idee’ behandeln, welche ihre einzelnen Bestandteile aus sich ‘emanieren’ läßt.”
5. For additional biographical accounts, see Bendix (1959), Hanke et al. (2019), Kaesler (2014), Müller (2020), Mommsen (1974), Radkau (2009), Ringer (2004), Roth (2001), and Weber (1988b).
6. Originally, Weber (1980, p. 833) wrote: “*Sine ira et studio*, ‘ohne Zorn und Eingenommenheit’, soll der Beamte seines Amtes walten. [...] *Parteinahme, Kampf, Leidenschaft—ira et studium—sind das Element des Politikers.*”
7. Quite certainly, David Beetham would qualify this conclusion. He draws attention to Weber’s political writings, where the administrator “does not only act entirely *sine ira et studio*, but his outlook is affected by the presumptions of social class. [...] As a power group it [the bureaucracy] has the capacity to influence the goals of the political system; as a *status stratum* it has a more unconscious effect upon the values of society at large” (Beetham, 1985, p. 67, italics in the original). Beetham (2006, p. 343) generally thinks that “it is mistaken to draw too sharp a distinction between Weber’s political and sociological writings—scientific the one, polemical and value-laden the other.”