

# Roots of Bureaucracy

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# I

We are witnessing an obvious tendency towards the increasing bureaucratisation of contemporary societies regardless of their social and political structures. Theorists in the West assure us that the momentum of bureaucratisation is such that we now live under a managerial system which has, somewhat imperceptibly, come to replace capitalism. On the other hand, we have the huge, stupendous growth of bureaucracy in the post-capitalist societies of the Soviet bloc and especially in the Soviet Union. We are justified in attempting to elaborate some theory of bureaucracy which would be more comprehensive and more satisfying than the fashionable and to a large degree meaningless cliché: 'managerial society'. It is not, however, easy to come to grips with the problem of bureaucracy; in essence this problem is as old as civilisation, although the intensity with which it has appeared before men's eyes has varied greatly over the epochs.

If I have undertaken to speak about the roots of bureaucracy, it is because to my mind we have to dig down to find the deepest causes – the initial ones – of bureaucracy, in order to see how and why this evil of human civilisation has grown to such terrifying proportions. In the problem of bureaucracy, to which the problem of the state is roughly parallel, is focused much of that relationship between man and society, between man and man, which it has now become fashionable to describe as 'alienation'.

The term itself suggests the rule of the 'bureau', of the apparatus, of something impersonal and hostile, which has assumed life and reigns over human beings. In common parlance, we also speak about the lifeless bureaucrats, about the men who form that mechanism. The human beings that administer the state look as if they were lifeless, as if they were mere cogs in the machine. In other words, we are confronted here in the most condensed, in the most intensive form with the reification of relationships between human beings, with the appearance of life in mechanisms, in things. This, of course, immediately brings to our mind the great complex of fetishism: over the whole area of our market economy man seems to be at the mercy of things, of commodities, even of currencies. Human and social relationships become objectified, whereas objects seem to assume the force and power of living elements. The parallel between man's alienation from the state and the representative of the state – the bureaucracy on the one hand, and – between man's alienation from the products of his own economy on the other, is obviously very close, and the two kinds of alienation are similarly interrelated.

There is a great difficulty in getting beyond mere appearances to the very core of the relationship between society and state, between the apparatus that administers the life of a community and the community itself. The difficulty consists in this: the appearance is not *only* appearance, it is also part of a reality. The fetishism of the state and of the commodity is, so to say, 'built-in' into the very mechanism in which state and market function. Society is at one and the same time estranged from the state and also inseparable from the state. The state is the incubus that oppresses society, it is also society's protective angel without which it cannot live.

Here again, some of the most hidden and complex aspects of the relationship between society and state are clearly and strikingly reflected in our common language. When we say 'they', meaning the bureaucrats who rule us, 'they' who impose taxes, 'they' who wage wars, who do all sorts of things which involve the life of all of us, we express a feeling of impotence, of estrangement from the state; but we are also conscious that without the state there would be no social life, no social development, no history. The difficulty in sifting appearance from reality consists in this: the bureaucracy performs certain functions which are obviously necessary and

indispensable for the life of society; yet it also performs functions which might theoretically be described as superfluous.

The contradictory aspects of bureaucracy have, of course, led to two contradictory and extremely opposed philosophical, historical and sociological views on the problem. There are, apart from many intermediate shadings, traditionally two basic approaches to the question of bureaucracy and state; the bureaucratic and the anarchist approach. You may remember that the Webbs liked to divide people into those who evaluated political problems from the bureaucratic or from the anarchist point of view. This is, of course, a simplification, but nevertheless there is something to be said for this division. The bureaucratic approach has had its great philosophers, its great prophets, and its celebrated sociologists. Probably the greatest philosophical apologist of the state was Hegel, just as the greatest sociological apologist of the state was Max Weber.

There is no doubt that old Prussia was the paradise of the bureaucracy and it is therefore not a matter of accident that the greatest apologists for the state and for bureaucracy have come from Prussia. Both Hegel and Weber, each in a different way and on different levels of theoretical thinking are, in fact, the metaphysicians of the Prussian bureaucracy, who generalise from the Prussian bureaucratic experience and project that experience on to the stage of world history. It is therefore necessary to keep in mind the basic tenets of this school of thought. To Hegel the state and bureaucracy were both the reflection and the reality of *the* moral idea, that is the reflection and the reality of supreme reason, the reality of the *Weltgeist*, the manifestation of God in history. Max Weber, who is in a way a descendant, a grandson of Hegel (perhaps a dwarf grandson), puts the same idea in the typically Prussian catalogue of the virtues of bureaucracy:

Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal cost – these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration, especially in its monocratic form... bureaucracy also stands under the principle of *sine ira ac studio*.<sup>1</sup>

Only in Prussia perhaps could these words have been written. Of course, this catalogue of virtues can very easily be invalidated by a parallel catalogue of vices. But it is to me all the more surprising and in a sense disquieting that Max Weber has recently become the intellectual light of so much Western sociology. (Professor Raymond Aron's gravest reproach in a polemic against myself was that I write and speak 'as if Max Weber never existed'.)

I am quite prepared to admit that no one has probably studied the minutiae of bureaucracy as deeply as Max Weber; true, he catalogued the various peculiarities of its development, but he failed to understand its full meaning. We all know the characteristic feature of that old German so-called historical school which could produce volumes and volumes on any particular industry, including the bureaucratic industry, but could rarely see the mainstream of its development.

At the other extreme we have the anarchist view of bureaucracy and of the state with its most eminent representatives – Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin – and with the various derivative trends, liberal, anarcho-liberal of various shadings. Now, this school, when you look at it closely, represents the intellectual revolt of the old France of the bourgeoisie, and of the old Russia of the

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<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology* (New York, 1958), pp. 214–15. [*Sine ira ac studio* – without anger or bias – MIA.]

muzhiks, against their bureaucracies. This school of thought specialises, of course, in composing catalogues of bureaucratic vices. The state and the bureaucracy are seen as the permanent usurpers of history. The state and bureaucracy are seen as the very embodiment of all evil in human society, the evil which cannot be eradicated otherwise than by the abolition of the state and the destruction of all bureaucracy. When Kropotkin wanted to show the depths of the moral deterioration of the French Revolution, he described how Robespierre, Danton, the Jacobins and the Hébertists, changed from revolutionaries to statesmen. In his eyes, what vitiated the revolution was bureaucracy and the state.

In fact each of these approaches contains an element of truth because in practice the state and bureaucracy have been the Jekyll and Hyde of human civilisation. They have indeed represented the virtues and the vices of human society and its historical development in a manner more concentrated, more intense than any other institution. State and bureaucracy focus in themselves this characteristic duality of our civilisation: every progress achieved so far has been accomplished by retrogression; every advance that man made has been bought at the price of regress; every unfolding of human creative energy has been paid for with the crippling or stunting of some other creative energy. This duality has been, I think, very striking in the development of bureaucracy throughout all social and political regimes.

The roots of bureaucracy are indeed as old as our civilisation, or even older, for they are buried on the border between the primitive communistic tribe and civilised society. It is there that we find the remotest and yet the very distant ancestry of the massive, elaborate bureaucratic machines of our age. They show themselves at the moment when the primitive community divides into the leaders and the led, the organisers and the organised, into the managers and the managed. When the tribe or the clan begins to learn that division of labour increases man's power over nature and his capacity to satisfy his needs, then we see the first germs of bureaucracy which become also the very earliest prelude to a class society.

The division of labour begins with the process of production with which also appears the first hierarchy of functions. It is here that we have the first glimpse of the gulf that was about to open in the course of civilisation between mental work and manual labour. The organiser of the first primitive process in cattle-breeding might have been the forbear of the mandarin, of the Egyptian priest, or the modern capitalist bureaucrat. The primary division between brain and brawn brought with it the other manifold sub-divisions, between agriculture and fishing, or trade and craft or sea-faring. The division of society into classes followed in the course of fundamental process of historic development. In society on the threshold of civilisation to that of our own days, the basic division has been not so much between the administrator and the worker, as between the owner and the man without property; and this division absorbed within itself or overshadowed the former one. Administration has been, in most epochs, subordinated to the owners of property, to the possessing classes.

One could broadly categorise the various types of relationships between bureaucracy and basic social classes: the first one might call the Egyptian-Chinese type; then comes the Roman-Byzantine type with its derivative of an ecclesiastic hierarchy in the Roman Church; then we have the Western European capitalist type of bureaucracy; the fourth would be the post-capitalist type. In the first three types, and especially in the feudal and the slave-owning society, the administrator is completely subordinate to the man of property, so much so that in Athens, in Rome and in Egypt it is usually from among the slaves that the bureaucracy is recruited. In Athens the first police force was recruited from among the slaves, because it was considered beneath the

dignity of the free man to deprive another free man of freedom. What a sound instinct! Here you have the almost naively striking expression of the dependence of the bureaucrat on the property owner: it is the slave who is the bureaucrat because bureaucracy is the slave of the possessing class.

In the feudal order the bureaucracy is more or less eclipsed because the administrators either come directly from the feudal class or are absorbed into that class. Social hierarchy is, so to say, 'built-in' into the feudal order and there is no need for a special hierarchical machine to manage public affairs and to discipline the property-less masses.

Later, much later, bureaucracy acquires a far more respectable status and its agents become 'free' wage-earners of the owners of property. Then it pretends to rise above the possessing classes, and indeed above all social classes. And in some respects and up to a point, bureaucracy indeed acquires that supreme status.

The great separation between the state machine and other classes comes, of course, in capitalism, where the earlier clearly marked hierarchy and dependence of man on man, so characteristic of feudal society, no longer exists. 'All men are equal' – the bourgeois fiction of equality before the law makes it essential that there should function an apparatus of power, a state machine strictly hierarchically organised. Like the hierarchy of economic power on the market, so the bureaucracy, as a political hierarchy, should see to it that society does not take the appearance of equality at its face value. There grows a hierarchy of orders, interests, administrative levels, which perpetuates the fiction of equality and yet enforces inequality.

What characterises the bureaucracy at this stage? The hierarchical structure in the first instance; then the seemingly self-sufficient character of the apparatus of power enclosed within itself. The tremendous scope, scale and complexity of our social life make the management of society more and more difficult, we are told; only skilled experts who possess the secrets of administration are able to perform the organising functions. No, indeed, we have not moved a very long way from the time when the Egyptian priest guarded the secrets which gave him power and made society believe that only he, the divinely inspired, could manage human affairs. Self-important bureaucracy, with its mystifying lingo which is to a very large extent a matter of its social prestige, is, after all, not far removed from the Egyptian priesthood, with its magic secrets. (Incidentally is it not also very close to the Stalinist bureaucracy with its obsessive secrecy?)

Many decades before Max Weber, who was himself so impressed by the esoteric wisdom of bureaucracy, Engels saw things in a more realistic and objective light:

The state [he says] is by no means a power imposed upon society from the outside... It is rather the product of society at a certain stage of development. It is an admission that this society has involved itself in an insoluble contradiction with itself, that it has become split in irreconcilable contradictions... In order that... classes with conflicting economic interests should not consume themselves and society in fruitless struggle, a power had become necessary which seemingly stands above society, a power that has to keep down the conflict and keep it within bounds of 'order'. That power emerging from society but rising above it and becoming more and more estranged from it is the state.

Even the welfare state, we may add, is, after all, only the power that emerges from society but rises above it and becomes more and more estranged from it. Engels goes on to say:

In possession of public force and power and of the right to levy taxes, the officials now stand as the organs of society above society.

He describes the process of the emergence of the state from the primitive community:

They [the officials] are not content with the free and willing respect that had been paid to the organs of a tribal community... Holders of a power estranged from society, they must be placed in a position of respect by means of special laws which assure them the enjoyment of a social halo and immunity.<sup>2</sup>

However, there is no use being angry with bureaucracy: its strength is only a reflection of society's weakness which lies in its division between the vast majority of manual workers and a small minority which specialises in brain work. The intellectual pauperism from which no nation has yet emancipated itself lies at the roots of bureaucracy. Other fungi have grown over those roots, but the roots themselves have persisted in capitalism and welfare capitalism and they have still survived in post-capitalist society.

## II

I would like to start this second lecture with a stricter re-definition of the subject of our discussion.

I am not interested in the general history of bureaucracy, nor do I want to give a description of the varieties and modalities of bureaucratic rule that can be found in history. The focus of my subject is this. What are the factors that have historically been responsible for the political power of bureaucracy? What are the factors that favour the political supremacy of bureaucracy over society? Why so far has no revolution succeeded in breaking down and destroying the might of the bureaucracy? On the morrow of every revolution, regardless of its character and the *ancien régime* which preceded it, a state machine rises like phoenix from the ashes.

In my first lecture I pointed out – with some over-emphasis – the perennial factor working in favour of bureaucracy, namely, the division of labour between intellectual work and manual labour, the gulf between the organisers and the organised. This contradistinction is in fact the prologue to class society; but in further social development that prologue becomes as if submerged by the more fundamental division between the slave owner and the slave, between the serf owner and the serf, between the man of property and the property-less.

The real massive ascendancy of bureaucracy as a distinct and separate social group came only with the development of capitalism, and it did so for a variety of reasons: economic and political. What favoured the spread of a modern bureaucracy was market economy, money economy and the continuous and deepening division of labour of which capitalism is itself a product. As long as the servant of the state was a tax farmer, or a feudal lord, or an auxiliary of a feudal lord, the bureaucrat was not yet a bureaucrat. The tax collector of the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth centuries was something of an entrepreneur; or he was a servant of the feudal lord or part of his retinue. The formation of bureaucracy into a distinct group was made possible only by the spread

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<sup>2</sup> Friedrich Engels, 'Der Ursprung der Familie', *Marx Engels Werke*, Volume 21 (1962), pp 165–66; *The Origin of the Family* (London, 1942), pp. 194–95.

and the universalisation of a money economy, in which every state employee was paid his salary in money.

The growth of bureaucracy was further stimulated by the breaking down of feudal particularisms and the formation of a market on a national scale. Only on the basis of a national market could national bureaucracy make its appearance. By themselves these general economic causes of the growth of bureaucracy explain only how bureaucracy in its modern form became possible, but they do not yet explain why it has grown and why in some definite historical circumstances it has acquired its political importance. To these questions one should seek an answer not in economic changes but in socio-political structures. We have, for instance, the striking fact that England, the country of classical capitalism, was the least bureaucratic of all capitalist countries, while Germany, until the last quarter of the nineteenth century the underdeveloped capitalist country, was the most bureaucratic. France, which held a middle position, held also a middle position with regard to the strength of bureaucracy in the political life.

If one were to seek certain general rules about the rise and decline of bureaucratic influence in capitalist society, one would find that the political power of bureaucracy under capitalism has always been in inverse proportion to the maturity, the vigour, the capacity for self-government of the strata constituting a given bourgeois society. On the other hand, when in highly developed bourgeois societies class struggles have reached something like a deadlock, when contending classes have lain as if prostrate after a series of exhausting social and political struggles, then political leadership has, almost automatically, passed into the hands of a bureaucracy. In such situations the bureaucracy establishes itself not only as the apparatus regulating the functioning of the state, but also as the power imposing its political will on society. The real cradle of modern bureaucracy, was, of course, the pre-bourgeois absolute monarchy – the Tudors in this country, the Bourbons in France, or the Hohenzollerns in Prussia – the monarchy which was maintaining the uncertain equilibrium between a decaying feudalism and a rising capitalism. Feudalism was already too weak to continue its supremacy, capitalism was still too weak to establish its domination; a stasis in the class struggle, as it were, between feudalism and capitalism left the room for the absolute monarchy to act as the umpire between the two opposed camps.

The stronger the opposition of feudal and bourgeois interests and the more paralysing the stalemate between them, the more scope was there for the bureaucracy of the absolutist monarchy to play the role of the arbiter. Incidentally, England (and also the United States) was the least bureaucratic of all capitalist countries, precisely because very early in history that feudal – capitalist antagonism was resolved through the gradual merger of the feudal and capitalist interests. The feudal-bourgeois notables, the great aristocratic English families assumed some of the functions which on the continent were exercised by bureaucracy. In a sense, the *embourgeoisés* feudal elements administered the state without becoming a distinct and separate social group. The United States too was in its history free from that strife between feudal and capitalist interests, the strife which acted as a stimulus for the growth of bureaucracy.

Quite a different and peculiar case was Russia, where the great power of state and bureaucracy resulted from the underdevelopment of both social strata: neither the feudal element nor the bourgeoisie was ever strong enough to manage the affairs of the state. It was the state that, like the demiurge, created social classes, now inducing their formation and expansion, now impeding and thwarting it. In this way its bureaucracy became not only an umpire but also the manipulator of all social classes.



If I were to give a subtitle to my further remarks it would probably be a very general one: on bureaucracy and revolution. Here I would like to clear some confusion, and I fear that in the process I shall clash with several established historical schools. As this is anyhow unavoidable, I shall pose the problem in its most provocative form. Was the English Puritan revolution a bourgeois revolution? Was the Great French Revolution bourgeois in character? At the head of the insurgent battalions there were no bankers, merchants or ship-owners. The *sans culottes*, the plebs, the urban paupers, the lower-lower middle classes were in the forefront of the battle. What did they achieve? Under the leadership of 'gentlemen farmers' (in England) and lawyers, doctors and journalists (in France), they abolished the absolutist monarchy and its courtier bureaucracy and swept away feudal institutions which were hindering the development of bourgeois property relations. The bourgeoisie had become strong enough and sufficiently aware of its power to aspire to political self-determination. It no longer wanted to accept the tutelage and the dictates of the absolutist monarchy; it wanted to rule society by itself. In the process of the revolution the bourgeoisie was driven forward by the plebeian masses – on the morrow the bourgeoisie attempted by itself to rule society at large.

The process of the revolution with all its crises, antagonisms, with the constant shifting of power from the more conservative to the more radical and even to the Utopian wings of the revolutionary camp – all these lead to a new political stalemate between the classes which came freshly to the fore: the plebeian masses, the *sans culottes*, the urban poor are tired and weary; but the victorious, now dominant class – the bourgeoisie – is also internally divided, fragmented, exhausted after the revolutionary struggle and incapable of governing society. Hence in the aftermath of bourgeois revolution we see the rise of a new bureaucracy somewhat different in character: we see a military dictatorship which outwardly looks almost like the continuation of the pre-revolutionary absolutist monarchy or an even worse version of it. The pre-revolutionary regime had its centralised state machine – a national bureaucracy. The revolution's first demand was the decentralisation of this machine. Yet this centralisation had not been due to the evil intentions of the ruler, but reflected the evolution of the economy which required a national market, and this 'national soil', as it were, fed the bourgeois forces which in their turn produced the revolution. The aftermath of the revolution brings renewed centralisation. This was so under Cromwell; this occurred under Napoleon. The process of centralisation and national unification and the rise of a new bureaucracy was so striking that Tocqueville, for example, saw in it nothing more than the continuation of pre-revolutionary tradition. He argued that what the French revolution had done was merely to carry further the work of the *ancien régime* and, had the revolution not taken place, this trend would have gone on all the same. This was the argument of a man who had his eyes fixed on the political aspect of the development only and completely ignored its social background and deeper social motives; he saw the shape but not the texture or the colour of society.

Political centralisation after the revolution went on as before, yet the character of the bureaucracy had completely and thoroughly changed. Instead of the courtier-bureaucracy of the *ancien régime*, France now had the bourgeois bureaucracy recruited from different layers of society. The bourgeois bureaucracy established under Napoleon survived the Restoration and in the end found its proper head in the Citizen King.

The next phase in which we see another rise of bureaucracy and a further promotion of centralistic tendencies of the state occurs again at a moment of political paralysis of all social classes. In 1848 we find a situation in which different class interests are again opposed to each other; this

time it is the interest of the established bourgeoisie and that of the nascent proletariat. To this day nobody has described this process of mutual exhaustion better than Karl Marx, especially in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*. He also demonstrated how the prostration of all social classes secures the triumph of the bureaucracy, or rather of its military arm, under Napoleon III. This situation was characteristic at the time not only of France but also of Germany, especially of Prussia, where the deadlock was many-sided: between the feudal and semi-feudal interests of the Junkers, the bourgeoisie and the new working class. And in Prussia it resulted in the rule and dictatorship of Bismarck's bureaucracy. (Incidentally, Marx and Engels described Bismarck's government as a 'Bonapartist' regime, although outwardly there was, of course, very little or nothing of the Bonaparte in Bismarck.)

### III

I am well aware that because of the vastness of the subject I can do no more than indicate schematically the main points which need further elaboration. I should perhaps warn you that I am not going to deal with reformist socialism and bureaucracy. This, important though it is politically, especially in this country, presents from my viewpoint very little theoretical interest. To my mind it is part of 'capitalism and bureaucracy'. The bulk of the economy remains capitalist whether 15 per cent or even 25 per cent of industry is nationalised, and here quantity decides also the quality. The whole background of social life is capitalist and an ordinary capitalist bureaucratic spirit permeates all industries including the nationalised ones. We hear a lot of grumbling about 'bureaucracy on the railways' or in the coal mines. During the recent strike we were presented on television some railwaymen who told us: 'Things are not as they used to be': before the nationalisation of the railways they could maintain a more personal relationship between themselves and their employers, while now the industry has become so anonymous that there is no personal link between the working-men and this vast nation-wide enterprise. This 'personal link' was, of course, a figment of the worker's imagination. What sort of a personal relationship was there between the footplateman and the boss of one or another of the five huge railway companies? But politically it was important that this railwayman really believed that in the Southern or Midland or Western Railway he was more than a mere cog. Now he felt 'alienated' from that vast entity into which he had to fit, for which he had to work. And this 'alienation', as the word goes, is a problem common to all sorts of bureaucratic establishments, no matter what is their broader social framework, and I would be the last to deny that there are certain common features between bureaucracy in a capitalist and in a post-capitalist system.

Now I should like to touch upon those special problems of bureaucracy which arise in a fully nationalised industry after a socialist revolution, under a regime which, at least in its beginnings, is in every sense a proletarian dictatorship. Clearly this problem affects one-third of the world, so it is weighty enough; and I am pretty sure that many of you will still see it acquire validity at least over two-thirds of the world.

One of the observations that occurred to me as I looked through some of the classical Marxist writings on bureaucracy was how relatively optimistically – one might say, lightmindedly – Marxists approached it. To give you one illustration: Karl Kautsky once asked himself the question whether a socialist society would be threatened with all the evils of bureaucracy. You may remember, if you have read *The Foundations of Christianity*, that Kautsky discusses the process

by which the Christian Church was transformed from a faith of the oppressed into a great imperial bureaucratic machine. This transformation was possible against the background of a society which lived on slave labour. The slaves of antiquity, devoid of any active class consciousness, were liable to become slaves of bureaucracy. But the modern working class, mature enough to overthrow capitalism, maintained Kautsky, will not allow a bureaucracy to rise on its back. This was not just an individual judgement of Kautsky, who for over two decades between Engels' death and the outbreak of the First World War was the most authoritative spokesman of Marxism and was considered a real successor to Marx and Engels. Engels himself in various of his works, especially in *Anti-Dühring*, committed himself to a view which almost ruled out in advance the existence of bureaucracy under socialism: 'The proletariat seizes the state power and transforms the means of production in the first instance into state property. But in doing this it puts an end to itself as proletariat, it puts an end to all class antagonism...'<sup>3</sup> Former societies needed the state as an organisation of the exploiting class, as a means of holding down the class that was exploited – slaves, serfs or wage labourers. In socialism the state, when it becomes really representative of society as a whole, makes itself superfluous. And with the full development of modern productive forces, with the abundance and superabundance of goods, there will be no need to keep men and labour in subjection.

I think it was Trotsky who used a very plain but very telling metaphor; the policeman can use his baton either for regulating traffic or for dispersing a demonstration of strikers or unemployed. In this one sentence is summed up the classical distinction between administration of things and administration of men. If you assume a society in which there is no class supremacy, the bureaucracy's role is reduced to the administration of things, of the objective social and productive process. We are not concerned with the elimination of *all* administrative functions – this would be absurd in an industrially developing society – but we are concerned with reducing the policeman's baton to its proper role, that of disentangling traffic jams.

When Marx and Engels analysed the experience of the Commune of Paris, they were as if half-aware of the bureaucratic threat that could arise in the future and they were at great pains to underline the measures that the Commune had taken in order to guarantee a socialist revolution against the recrudescence of a bureaucratic power. The Commune, they stressed, had taken a number of precautions which should serve as a pattern and a model for future socialist transformations: the Commune was elected in a general election and established an elected civil service, every member of which could be deposed at any time at the demand of the electorate. The Commune abolished the standing army and replaced it by the people at arms; it also established the principle that no civil servant could earn more than the ordinary worker. This should have abolished all privileges of a bureaucratic class or group. The Commune, in other words, set the example of a state which was to begin to wither away as soon as it was established. It was no matter of chance that only a few weeks before the October Revolution Lenin made a special effort to restore this, by then almost forgotten, part of Marxist teaching about state, socialism and bureaucracy. He expressed his idea of the state in that famous aphorism: under socialism or even in a proletarian dictatorship the administration should become so simplified that every cook should be able to manage state affairs.

In the light of all the painful experience of the last decades it is all too easy to see how very greatly the representatives of classical Marxism had indeed underrated the problem of bureau-

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<sup>3</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (London, 1943), p 308.

cracy. There were, I think, two reasons why this was so. The original founders of the Marxist school never really attempted to portray in advance the society which would emerge after a socialist revolution. They analysed revolution, so to say, in the abstract, in a way in which Marx in *Das Kapital* analysed not any specific capitalist system, but capitalism in the abstract, capitalism *per se*; they also thought of socialist or post-capitalist society in the abstract. If one considers that they carried their analysis so many decades before the actual attempt, their method was scientifically justified. The other reason is, so to say, psychological. They could not help viewing the future revolution on the pattern of the greatest revolutionary experience in their own life, that of 1848. They saw it as a chain process of European revolutions, as 1848 was, spreading at least over Europe more or less simultaneously. (Here was that germ of the idea of permanent revolution which was in this respect not the original creation of Trotsky; it was indeed very deeply embedded in the thought of classical Marxism.) An all-European socialist revolution would have been relatively secure immediately after its victory. With very little social tension there would be hardly any civil strife, and without wars of intervention there would have been no need for the re-creation of standing armies which are an important factor of bureaucratisation. They also assumed that at least in the highly industrialised societies of Western Europe, the very considerable proportion of the working class would provide a strong mass support for the revolutionary government. They also trusted that once the majority of the European working class would be won for the revolution, it would, as it were, remain faithful and loyal to the revolution. This, together with the existing democratic tradition would form the strongest guarantee against any revival or formation of a new bureaucratic machine.

When we are tempted to reproach the founders of the Marxist school with underrating the dangers of bureaucracy in post-revolutionary society, we must bear in mind the fact that they took the abundance of goods as the first condition, a precondition and *raison d'être* of a socialist revolution. 'The possibility of securing for every member of society, through social production, an existence which is not only fully sufficient from a material standpoint... but also guarantees to them the completely unrestricted development and exercise of their physical and mental faculties – this possibility now exists... it does exist', stated Engels emphatically in *Anti-Dühring* nearly 90 years ago.<sup>4</sup> It is only in the middle of this century that we are faced with some attempts at socialist revolution in countries where a desperately insufficient production makes any decent material existence quite impossible.

There was undoubtedly in Marxism an ambivalent attitude towards the state. On one hand – and this Marxism had in common with anarchism – a conviction based on a deeply realistic historical analysis that all revolutions are frustrated as long as they do not do away with the state; on the other, the conviction that the socialist revolution has need of a state for its purpose, to smash, to break the old capitalist system and create its own state machine that would exercise the proletarian dictatorship. But that machine, for the first time in history, would represent the interests not of a privileged minority but of a mass of toilers, the real producers of society's wealth. 'The first act in which the state really comes forward as the representative of society as a whole' – the taking possession of the means of production – 'is at the same time its last independent act as a state.'<sup>5</sup> From then on the interference of the state in social relations becomes superfluous. The government of persons is replaced by the administration of things. The political function of

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<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (London, 1943), p 311.

<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Dühring* (London, 1943), p 309.

the state disappears; what remains is the direction of the process of production. The state will not be abolished overnight, as the anarchists imagine; it will slowly 'wither away'.

The reality of the Russian revolution was in every single respect a negation of the assumptions made by classical Marxism. It was certainly not the revolution in the abstract – it was real enough! It did not follow the 1848 pattern, it was not an all-European upheaval; it remained isolated in one country. It occurred in a nation where the proletariat was a tiny minority and even that minority disintegrated as a class in the process of world war, revolution and civil war. It was also a country extremely backward, poverty stricken, where the problem immediately facing the revolutionary government was not to build socialism, but to create the first preconditions for any modern civilised life. All this resulted in at least two political developments which invariably led to the recrudescence of bureaucracy.

I have described how the political supremacy of bureaucracy always followed a stalemate in the class struggle, an exhaustion of all social classes in the process of political and social struggles. Now, *mutatis mutandis*, after the Russian revolution we see the same situation again. In the early 1920s all classes of Russian society, workers, peasants, bourgeoisie, landlords, aristocracy are either destroyed or completely exhausted politically, morally, intellectually. After all the trials of a decade filled with world war, revolution, civil wars and industrial devastation no social class is capable of asserting itself. What is left is only the machine of the Bolshevik party which establishes its bureaucratic supremacy over society as a whole. However, *cela change et ce n'est plus la même chose*: society as a whole has undergone a fundamental change. The old cleavage between the men of property and the property-less masses gives place to another division, different in character but no less noxious and corrosive: the division between the rulers and the ruled. Moreover, after the revolution it acquires a far greater force than it had before when it was as if submerged by class distinction and class discord. What again comes to the fore is the perennial, the oldest split between the organisers and the organised. The prelude to class society appears now as the epilogue. Far from 'withering away' the post-revolutionary state gathers into its hands such power as it has never had before. For the first time in history bureaucracy seems omnipotent and omnipresent. If under the capitalist system we saw that the power of bureaucracy always found a counterweight in the power of the propertied classes, here we see no such restrictions and no such limitations. The bureaucracy is the manager of the totality of the nation's resources; it appears more than ever before independent, separated, indeed set high above society. Indeed far from withering away the state reaches its apotheosis which takes the form of an almost permanent orgy of bureaucratic violence over all classes of society.

Let us now go back for a moment to the Marxist analysis of the revolution in the abstract and see where and in what way the picture of post-revolutionary Russia contradicts this analysis. Had there been a European revolution in which proletarian majorities would have won swiftly and decisively and spared their nations all the political and social turmoil and slaughter of wars and civil strife, then very probably we would not have seen that fear-inspiring apotheosis of the Russian state. Nevertheless the problem would still have existed to a degree which the classical Marxism did not envisage. To put it in a nutshell: it seems that the thinkers and theoreticians of the nineteenth century tended to telescope certain stages of future development from capitalism to socialism. What classical Marxism 'telescoped' was the revolution-and-socialism as it were, whereas between the revolution and socialism there was bound to lie a terribly long and complicated period of transition. Even under the best of circumstances that period would have been characterised by an inevitable tension between the bureaucrat and the worker. *Some prognosis of*

that tension can be found in Marxism, however. In their famous *Critique of the Gotha Programme* Marx and Engels speak about two phases of communism, the lower and the higher one. In the lower one there still prevails the 'narrow horizon of bourgeois rights' with its inequality and its wide differentials in individual incomes.<sup>6</sup> Obviously, if in socialism society, according to Marx, still needs to secure the full development of its productive forces until a real economy of wealth and abundance is created, then it has to reward skill and offer incentives. The bureaucrat is in a sense the skilled worker and there is no doubt that he will place himself on the privileged side of the scale.

The division between the organisers and the organised acquires more and not less importance, precisely because the means of production having passed from private to public ownership, the responsibility for the running of the national economy rests now with the organisers. The new society has not developed on its own foundations, but is emerging from capitalism and still bears all the birthmarks of capitalism. It is not yet ripe economically, morally and intellectually, to reward everyone according to his needs and as long as everyone has to be paid according to his work, the bureaucracy will remain the privileged group. No matter what the pseudo-Marxist terminology of present Russian leaders, Russian society today is still far from socialist – it has only made the very first step on the road of transition from capitalism towards socialism.

The tension between the bureaucrat and the worker is rooted in the cleavage between brain work and manual labour. It simply is not true that today's Russian state can be run by any cook (although all sorts of cooks try to do it). In practice it proved impossible to establish and maintain the principle proclaimed by the Commune of Paris which served Marx as the guarantee against the rise of bureaucracy, the principle extolled again by Lenin on the eve of October, according to which the functionary should not earn more than the ordinary worker's wage. This principle implied a truly egalitarian society – and here is part of an important contradiction in the thought of Marx and his disciples. Evidently, the argument that no civil servant, no matter how high his function, must not earn more than an ordinary worker, cannot be reconciled with the other argument that in the lower phase of socialism which still bears the stamp of 'bourgeois rights' it would be utopian to expect 'equality of distribution'. In the post-revolutionary Russian state with its poverty and its inadequate development of productive forces the scramble for rewards was bound to be fierce and ferocious, and because the abolition of capitalism was inspired by a longing for egalitarianism, the inequality was even more revolting and shocking. It was also inequality on an abysmally low level of existence, or rather inequality below subsistence level.

Part of the Marxist theory of the withering away of the state was based upon a certain balance between its centralistic organisation and the universal element of decentralisation. The socialist state was to have been a state of elected communes, local municipal councils, local governments and self-governments, yet they were all to form a unified organism which was necessary for a rational nationalised mode of production. This concept also presupposed a highly developed society which Russia at the beginning of the century was not.

In the development of post-capitalist society the tension between the worker and bureaucrat may yet prove to have some essentially creative elements. The worker and the bureaucrat are equally necessary for the transition towards socialism. As long as the working masses are still in that stage of intellectual pauperism left over from the centuries of oppression and illiteracy, the management of the processes of production must fall to the civil servant. On the other hand, in

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

a truly post-capitalist society the basic social class are the workers and socialism is the workers' and not the bureaucrats' business. The dynamic balance between the official and the worker will find its counterpart in the authority of the state and in the control of the masses over the state. This will also assure the necessary equilibrium between the principle of centralisation and that of decentralisation. What we have seen in Russia has been an utter disequilibrium. As a result of objective historic circumstances and subjective interests, the balance swung heavily, decisively, absolutely to the side of bureaucracy. What we have seen in Hungary and Poland in 1956 was a reaction against this – Stalinist – state of affairs with an extreme swinging of the pendulum in the other direction and the workers' passionate, violent, unreasoning revolt against bureaucratic despotism, a revolt no doubt justified by all their experiences and grievances, but a revolt which in its consequences led again to a grave and dangerous imbalance.

How then do I see the prospects and how do I see the further development of that tension between the worker and the bureaucrat?

I have indicated earlier all the faults of the historical perspective in the classical Marxist view of bureaucracy. Yet, I think that basically and fundamentally this view helps to cope with the problem of bureaucracy far better than any other that I have come across.

The question which we have to answer is this: has the bureaucracy, whose apotheosis after the revolution I have described, constituted itself into a new class? Can it perpetuate itself as a privileged minority? Does it perpetuate social inequality? I would like first of all to draw your attention to one very obvious and important but often forgotten fact: all the inequality that exists in today's Russia between the worker and the bureaucrat is an inequality of consumption. This is undoubtedly very important, irritating and painful; yet with all the privileges which the bureaucrat defends brutally and stubbornly he lacks the essential privilege of owning the means of production. Officialdom still dominates society and lords over it, yet it lacks the cohesion and unity which would make of it a separate class in the Marxist sense of the word. The bureaucrats enjoy power and some measure of prosperity, yet they cannot bequeath their prosperity and wealth to their children. They cannot accumulate capital, invest it for the benefit of their descendants: they cannot perpetuate themselves or their kith and kin.

It is true that Soviet bureaucracy dominates society – economically, politically and culturally – more obviously and to a greater extent than does any modern possessing class. Yet it is also more vulnerable. Not only can it not perpetuate itself, but it has been unable even to secure for itself the continuity of its own position, the continuity of management. Under Stalin one leading group of bureaucrats after another was beheaded, one leading group of managers of industry after another was purged. Then came Khrushchev who dispersed the most powerful centre of that bureaucracy: all the economic ministries in the capital were scattered over wide and far-flung Russia. Until this day, the Soviet bureaucracy has not managed to acquire that social, economic and psychological identity of its own which would allow us to describe it as a new class. It has been something like a huge amoeba covering post-revolutionary society with itself. It is an amoeba because it lacks a social backbone of its own, because it is not a formed entity, not an historic force that comes on the scene in the way in which, say, the old bourgeoisie came forth after the French revolution.

Soviet bureaucracy is also hamstrung by a deep inherent contradiction: it rules as a result of the abolition of property in industry and finance, as a result of workers' victory over the *ancien régime*; and it has to pay homage to that victory; it has to acknowledge ever anew that it manages industry and finance on behalf of the nation, on behalf of the workers. Privileged as they are, the Soviet managers have to be on their guard: as more and more workers receive more and more

education, the moment may easily come when the managers' skill, honesty and competence may come under close scrutiny. They thrive on the apathy of the workers who so far have allowed them to run the state on their behalf. But this is a precarious position, an incomparably less stable foundation than that sanctified by tradition, property and law. The conflict between the liberating origin of bureaucracy's power and the use it makes of that power generates constant tension between 'us' the workers and 'them' the managerial and political hierarchy.

There is also another reason for the lack of stability and cohesion in the managerial group no matter how privileged it has become. Over the last decades the Soviet bureaucracy has all the time been in a process of stupendous expansion. Millions of people from the working class and to a lesser extent from the peasantry were recruited into its ranks. This continuous expansion militates against the crystallisation of the bureaucracy not only into a class but even into a cohesive social group. I know, of course, that once a man from the lower classes is made to share in the privileges of the hierarchy, he himself becomes a bureaucrat. This may be so in individual cases and in abstract theory, but on the whole 'betrayal of one's class' does not work so very simply. When the son of a miner or a worker becomes an engineer or an administrator of a factory he does not on the next day become completely insensitive to what goes on in his former environment, in the working class. All surveys show convincingly that in no other country is there such a rapid movement from manual to non-manual and to what the Americans like to call 'élite strata' as there is in the Soviet Union.

We must also realise that the privileges of the great majority of the bureaucracy are very, very paltry. The Russian administrator has the standard of living of our lower middle classes. Even the luxuries of the small minority high on the top of the pyramid are not especially enviable, particularly if one considers the risks – and we all know now how terrible these were under Stalin.

Of course, even small privileges contribute to the tension between the worker and the bureaucrat, but we should not mistake that tension for a class antagonism, in spite of some similarities which on closer examination would prove only very superficial. What we observe here is rather the hostility between members of the same class, between, say, a skilled miner and an unskilled one, between the engine driver and a less expert railwayman. This hostility and this tension contain in themselves a tremendous political antagonism, but one that cannot be resolved by any upheaval in society. It can be resolved only by the growth of the national wealth in the first instance, a growth which would make it possible to supply the broadest masses of the population with the minimum needs, and more than that. It can be resolved by the spread and improvement in education, because it is the material and intellectual wealth of society that leads to the softening of the age-old division – the renewed and sharpened division – between the organisers and the organised. When the organised is no longer the dumb and dull and helpless muzhik, when the cook is no longer the old scullion, then indeed the gulf between the bureaucrat and the worker can disappear. What will remain will be the division of functions not of social status.

The old Marxist prospect of 'withering away' of the state may seem to us odd. But let us not play with old formulas which were part of an idiom to which we are not accustomed. What Marx really meant was that the state should divest itself of its oppressive political functions. And I think this will become possible only in a society based on nationalised means of production, free from slumps and booms, free from speculations and speculators, free from the uncontrollable forces of the whimsical market of private economy; in a society in which all the miracles of science and technology are turned to peaceful and productive uses; in which automation in industry is not



hampered by fear of investment on the one side and fear of redundancy on the other; in which working hours are short and leisure civilised (and completely unlike our stultifying commercialised mass entertainment!); and – last but not least – in a society free from cults, dogmatism and orthodoxies – in such a society the antagonism between brainwork and manual labour will really wither away, as will the division between the organisers and the organised. Then, and only then, it will be seen that if bureaucracy was a faint prelude to class society, bureaucracy will mark the fierce ferocious epilogue to class society – no more than an epilogue.

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Isaac Deutscher  
Roots of Bureaucracy  
1969

*Socialist Register 1969* (Merlin Press, London, 1969): 'At the beginning of 1960 Isaac Deutscher gave three lectures on the subject of bureaucracy to a graduate seminar at the London School of Economics. The following text is a shortened version of these lectures edited by Tamara Deutscher.' Scanned and prepared for the Marxist Internet Archive by Paul Flowers. [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org). While Deutscher did not identify as a libertarian marxist, this text is useful for a libertarian marxist reading.

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