

## Max Weber on Bureaucratization in 1909

A speech Max Weber gave to the Verein für Sozialpolitik (Association for Social Policy) in 1909. From Appendix I, in *Max Weber and German Politics*, by J.P. Mayer, 1944, pp. 125-131, London: Faber & Faber Ltd. Perhaps because it was a speech and not the careful scholarship he is known for, Weber was much more expressive of his personal reactions to bureaucracy, his predictions as to the evolutionary trajectory of the West, and of his views of socialism and capitalism. One also gets a glimpse of Weber's humor in the face of the bureaucratic juggernaut.

I hope I shall be excused if, after this morning's discussions, which have been devoted mainly to very interesting specific problems, I return to those general aspects which have emerged in the debates, beginning with what our esteemed master, Privy Councillor Wagner, said this morning. One of his pronouncements I heard with astonishment; namely, that the railway profits in Prussia go to benefit the poorer classes. To my knowledge, it is mainly from the pockets of the poorer classes that they are drawn (laughter) and they are used first and foremost to pay the state owners' taxes (Cries of 'Hear, hear!' and opposition). Perhaps this point of view, which I deliberately stress, is as one-sided as Privy Councillor Wagner's, but it was impossible to allow his words to pass unchallenged. (Cry of 'He didn't say that!') (Privy Councillor Wagner: 'I said tht the great national works would benefit.') But you said more than that!

Then I must refer to one or two of my brother's expositions. Although our opinions differ in many things, I can only say that on this point we are in complete agreement. My brother is certainly as convinced as Privy Councillor Wagner and myself that the forward progress of bureaucratic mechanization is irresistible. (Hear, hear!) Indee, there is nothing, no machinery in the world, which works so precisely as does this human machine—nor so cheaply! It is, for instance, nonsense to say that self-government must be juster because it is administered from the high places. When a purely technical and faultless administration, a precise and objective solution of concrete problems is taken as the highest and only goal, then on this basis one can only say: away with everything but an official hierarchy which does these things as objectively, precisely, and 'soullessly' as any machine. (Cries of 'Nonsense'.)

The technical superiority of the bureaucratic mechanism stands unshaken, as does the technical superiority of the machine over the handworker. But at the time when the Verein für Sozialpolitik was founded, it was Privy Councillor Wagner's generation—negligible in numbers just as we dissentient are to-day negligible compared with them—that cried out for other than such purely technical measures. They, gentlemen, had to fight against the storm of applause for the purely technical results of industrial mechanization as the Manchester theory then represented them. It

seems to me that to-day they are in danger of giving just such applause to mechanization in the sphere of government and politics. For what else, after all, have we heard from them? Imagine the consequences of that comprehensive bureaucratization and rationalization which already to-day we see approaching. Already now, throughout private enterprise in wholesale manufacture, as well as in all other economic enterprises run on modern lines, Rechenhaftigkeit, rational calculation, is manifest at every stage. By it, the performance of each individual is mathematically measured, each man becomes a little cog in the machine and, aware of this, his one preoccupation is whether he can become a bigger cog. Take as an extreme example the authoritative power of the State or of the municipality in a monarchical constitution: it is strikingly reminiscent of the ancient kingdom of Egypt, in which the system of the 'minor official' prevailed at all levels. To this day there has never existed a bureaucracy which could compare with that of Egypt. This is known to everyone who knows the social history of ancient times; and it is equally apparent that to-day we are proceeding towards an evolution which resembles that system in every detail, except that it is built on other foundations, on technically more perfect, more rationalized, and therefore much more mechanized foundations. The problem which beset us now is not: how can this evolution be changed?—for that is impossible, but what will come of it? We willingly admit that there are honourable and talented men at the top of our administration; that in spite of all the exceptions such people have opportunities to rise in the official hierarchy, just as the universities, for instance, claim that, in spite of all the exceptions, they constitute a chance of selection for talent. But horrible as the thought is that the world may one day be peopled with professors (laughter)—we would retire on to a desert island if such a thing were to happen (laughter)—it is still more horrible to think that the world could one day be filled with nothing but those little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards bigger ones—a state of affairs which is to be seen once more, as in the Egyptian records, playing an ever-increasing part in the spirit of our present administrative system, and specially of its offspring, the students. This passion for bureaucracy, as we have heard it expressed here, is enough to drive one to despair. It is as if in politics the spectre of timidity—which has in any case always been rather a good standby for the German—were to stand alone at the helm; as if we were deliberately to become men who need 'order' and nothing but order, who become nervous and cowardly if for one moment this order wavers, and helpless if they are torn away from their total incorporation in it. That the world should know no men but these: it is in such an evolution that we are already caught up, and the great question is therefore not how we can promote and hasten it, but what can we oppose to this machinery in order to keep a portion of mankind free from this parceling-out of the soul, from this supreme mastery of the bureaucratic way of life. The answer to this question to-day clearly does not lie here.

We should rather ask ourselves now, what are the social political prospects under this advancing bureaucracy which you so passionately applaud. Gentlemen, I could not but shake my head at the illusion which seems to have possessed all of you here that, when the private employer has been replaced to the fullest extent by the state or municipal official, the result will be anything other than the administration of state authority from the employer's point of view. The officials now have to reckon with the same annoyances and petty quarrels which daily faced the private employer with his workers, and nobody will try to make us believe that social politics will benefit. It is always the employees, the officials in private industry, who are more saintly than the saints, and they are far more difficult to deal with than the boss himself. What will happen if state and municipal officials gain authority over ever-widening classes of workers? Will they acquire a greater sense of social politics by the inevitable continued friction with the workers' organizations? (Hear, here!) It was even thought that if the state were to take a share in the coalmining industry, and were to take over mines and enter the mining syndicate, this cartel would be run on social political lines; what, then, is the fate which will await the state if this wholesale surrender takes place? It would play the part, not of Siegfried, but of King Gunther with Brunhilde. (Laughter.)

It is common knowledge that the conditions in state-owned mines are the worst thing that exists in social politics (Cries of "Come, come!) And you can blame no man for it. If I were in such a position I would also find it impossible in the long run to prevent such conditions arising; if I had the daily friction with workers, either individually or in organizations, so that I could feel my temper rising at the eternal interference with my carefully worked-out plans, and wished I could send all these people to the devil; for I would be underestimating myself as a true bureaucrat if I did not claim to know, much better than these blockheads, what was good for them. In such quarrels the minds of the public officials, who rightly enough consider themselves to be far more intelligent than their workers, will work on the lines that I have just described. However capable and farsighted these gentlemen may be, they become brittle and draw the same conclusions as I have imputed to them. (Hear, hear! Bravo!) Only a community which is independent of the employers' outlook can, in the long run, cultivate 'social politics'. I will not discuss to-day what conclusions are to be drawn from this. I only wished to challenge the unquestioning idolization of bureaucracy.

The principle of ever-widening nationalization and communalization has found greatly varying degrees of expression in the Verein für Sozialpolitik since the beginning of its history. Such an all-around nationalizer as Privy Councillor Wagner has, indeed, been somewhat of a solitary figure—I might almost say, a rarity—in our Society. (Cry of 'On the contrary!') I know there have been others. I know that among

them was our venerable teacher, Professor von Schmoller, although he was much more cautious and, as he reminded me a little while ago, viewed with great skepticism the nationalization of the French railways, to take an example. Be that as it may, an essential factor in the predilection for bureaucracy which exist among us in varying degrees, is a purely moral sentiment; namely, the belief in the unshakability of the undoubtedly high moral standard of German officialdom. I personally consider such matters also in the light of the international power-rank and cultural development of a nation. Here, however, the 'ethical' aspect of the machine to-day plays a decidedly minor part. Admittedly, in so far as they encourage the precise functioning of the machine, the 'ethics' are valuable to the mechanism as such. But my impression is this: This 'corrupt' civil service of France, this corrupt civil service of America, this much abused 'nightwatchmen's government' of England—how, in point of fact, do these nations fare? How, for instance, do they fare in the realm of foreign politics? Are we the ones who have made progress in this field, or who has? Democratically governed nations with an undoubtedly partly corrupt officialdom have gained far more success in the world than our highly moral bureaucracy; and judging purely on the basis of 'realistic politics' and, furthermore, taking into consideration the 'power value' of the nations in the world—which for many of us is the ultimate value—then I ask: which kind of system—the expansion of private capital, coupled with a purely business officialdom which is more easily exposed to corruption; or state government through the highly moral, authoritarian and glorified German officialdom—which system is more 'efficient', to use an English expression? Nor can I acknowledge, with all due respect for the ethically upright mechanism of German bureaucracy, that it has to this day shown itself capable of doing much for the greatness of our country as has the officialdom of other nations, divested of its celestial raiment, morally infinitely inferior, and associated with the—to many of us—so despicable profit motive of private capital. (Cries of Bravo! And applause.)

Cf. Max Weber, *Gesammelte Ausageetze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik*, pp. 412 sqq.