According to Weber, what makes bureaucracies efficient? Do you agree?

Introduction

This essay set out to understand what, according to Weber makes bureaucracies efficient. To understand the efficiencies of Weber's bureaucracy, we have to understand why bureaucracies have formed and how they have formed. Furthermore, we have to understand their inherent characteristics which creates efficiencies and how this has caused by rationalisation. I will then look at the different types of rationalisation and understand which type of rationalisation Weber was referring to in the construction of the rational bureaucracy. Their characteristics have then to be analysed and thus understood how these efficiencies work and whilst analysing these characteristics, we have to see if there are any irrationalities or inefficiencies which can arise out of what Weber views as efficient. With this, I will then look at argument against Weber's Ideal Type of bureaucracy, and why some sociologists do not believe that Weber's bureaucracy is efficient. Thus, by looking at both arguments, I would be able to drawn a personal conclusion.

Types of Bureaucracy and their Functions

Bureaucracies form, according to Weber, primarily because there are pressures by the capitalist market economy which demands that administration either private or public *"be discharged precisely, unambiguously, continuously and with as much speed as possible"*[1] Bureaucracy is formed because there is often a need for there to be professional management of the modern means of communication, and thus this is normally the 'pacemaker' of bureaucratisation. Public lands, roads, railroads, waterways and the telegraphy were essentially managed by in a public and collective way. The development of the public communication has been a condition of importance for bureaucratic administration, though it is not a decisive condition. The crucial and significant reason for the evolution and advance of the bureaucratic apparatus has been it's technical superiority over any other form of organisation. *"Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of materials and personal costs"*[2] This, according to Weber, was the technical advantage of bureaucracies forming over the 'honorific and patrimonial' forms of administration.

To understand what makes bureaucracies efficient is to understand the characteristics of bureaucracy. Weber, constructed a *"ideal"* type of bureaucratic organisation, which he defined as *"a hierarchical organisation designed rationally to coordinate the work of many individuals in the pursuit of large scale administrative tasks and organisational goals"*[3] Bureaucracy is a system of control; in order to be effective it must be legitimate. There are six elements, which are the foundations of Weber's "*ideal*" type. *"The regular activities required for the purposes of the organisation are distributed in a fixed way as official duties*"[4]. Officials specialise in a particular area of the organisation and complex

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[1] Gerth H.H. and Mills C.W. – From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology – 1997
[2] Gerth H.H. and Mills C.W. – From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology – 1997
[3] Mouselis N.P. – Organisation and Bureaucracy - 1967
[4] Gerth H.H. and Mills C.W. – From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology – 1997

tasks are broken into smaller manageable tasks. Each official has clearly defined responsibilities and competences. A chain of command and responsibility is established, officials are accountable for their conduct and the conduct of their subordinates. Furthermore, Weber purports that *"The organisation of offices follows the principle of hierarchy; that is every lower office is under the control and supervision of a higher one"[5]*. Rules clearly define the limits of authority and there is an established belief in the correctness of these rules. These rules are procedures or obligations, which are explicitly stated in the organisation's charter. Rules lay down the fixed procedures for the performance of each individual task. They impose strict discipline and control and leave little room for personal initiative or discretion. Activities are governed by rules, not by personal considerations therefore the 'ideal official' performs his duties in a "*spirit of formalistic impersonality… without hatred or passion"[6]* Weber said that *bureaucratic administration means fundamentally the exercise of control on the basis of knowledge. This is a feature of it which makes it specifically rational"[7]* Consequently according to Weber, officials should in an *"ideal type"* of bureaucracy be promoted on their knowledge and skills, which in turn benefit the organisational goals. *"separation of public monies from private property".* Bureaucratic administration involves the strict separation of private and official income. Officials in the administration do not own any part of the organisation and cannot make private gains form it. These characteristics, is claimed by Weber, to be the factors in which influence the efficiency of a bureaucracy.

The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organisation has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organisation"[8]. Here, according to Weber, bureaucracy is the most efficient system compared to any other system.
The traditional or machine bureaucratic organisation possesses all the bureaucratic characteristics. The important decisions are made at the top, whilst at the bottom; routine procedures are used. In this organisation *"precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and material and personal costs are raised to optimum levels*"[9] Superiority stems from specialised skills. There is a reduction in uncertainty because of the machine-like administrative system, thus leading to further efficiencies.

There are no personal emotions or interests, as the principle of bureaucracy is *sine ira ac studio. "It is horrible to think that the world would one day be filled with little cogs, little men clinging to little jobs and striving towards bigger ones"[10]* The more 'dehumanised' a bureaucracy can become, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred and all personal, irrational and emotional elements. Once a "*pure*" bureaucracy is established, it is among the hardest of social structures to defeat. Where the bureaucratisation of the organisation has been completely carried through, a form of power relation is established that is nearly indestructible.

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[5] Gerth H.H. and Mills C.W. – From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology – 1997
[6] Henderson and Parsons – Bureaucracy - 1947
[7] Gerth H.H. and Mills C.W. – From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology – 1997
[8] Gerth H.H. and Mills C.W. – From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology – 1997
[9] Mommsen W.J. – The Political and Social Theory of Max Weber - 1989
[10] Gerth H.H. and Mills C.W. – From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology – 1997

Thus the bureaucratic system is seen to be much more efficient because each employee of the organisation knows precisely what their duties are within the organisation, and there fore many tasks will be performed a lot quicker and more efficiently. The clear-cut rules set by the bureaucratic system also enables the organisation to respond readily to demands that are set and make decision making easier. Bureaucratic systems have a greater sense of direction and purpose than other types of organisation structure and this helped by the hierarchy of positions and well developed rule system that is consistent in a bureaucracy. The clear-cut criteria of a bureaucratic system enables the organisation to appoint successors when an employee leaves with out little trouble, and therefore causes as little disruption as possible. Bureaucracies also enable individual cases to be evaluated in terms of well-developed rule-system, and offer the organisation consistency on decision-making and to a certain extern prevents preferential treatment. Weber believed that the evolution of the bureaucratic system has come about through rationalisation and rationalisation has been central in terms of the characteristics of bureaucracy.

Within the economy and society, Weber believed there to be two types of rationalities, and that there was a clear distinction between instrumental rationality and value rationality or formal and substantive rationality. When Weber refers to the rationalisation of the modern world, he has mainly in mind the increasing importance of formally and substantively rational institutions.

Formal rationality is essentially a procedural concept. It is a property of economic, legal and bureaucratic systems that allow for calculability and predictability. In cases of economic action, formal rationality reaches its highest form in capital accounting. Within the law, formal rationality requires that "*in both substantive and procedural matters, only unambiguous general characteristics of the facts of the case are taken into account*"[11]
Within bureaucracy, formal rationality requires general rules, hierarchy, full time officials, and specialised training etc… Formal rationality in economic fields also requires formally rational laws and administration; subsuming under rules is a feature of formal rationality. Economic, legal and bureaucratic systems are substantively rational when they aim at creating a specific distribution of goods, income or life chances, or aim at bringing about some other substantive end. These systems are notional in the sense that they are not subject to individual impulses, but are systematically orientated to a publicly defined purpose. Substantive rationality of legal and bureaucratic institutions is a form of instrumental adaptation. Whereas, individual value-rational actions are orientated towards a specific behaviour without regard for its consequences whilst substantive rational actions are guided by it consequences.

Although the superiority of a bureaucratic organisation's technical efficiency compared with other organisations is not disputed, there are several disadvantages of this system. Karl Marx believed that bureaucracy contributed to men's alienation, feeling of powerlessness and helplessness due to the oppression of bureaucrats. Weber believed that the individual becomes a simple "*cog*" in a machine, a well disciplined and regulated automation with a specialised technical knowledge and generalised ignorance and indifference to his position and purpose in the organisation. Michels, was another critic of

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[11] Elster J. (ed) Turner S. – The Cambridge Companion to Weber – 2000

Weber's Ideal Type bureaucracy, where he claimed that the lower ranking members of the organisation were "*manipulated and exploited by those who supposedly promoted their interest*"[12] "*Once in a dominant position, the primary interest of the elite in the organisation was to maintain its power, even if such a policy was detrimental as a whole.*"[13]

Bureaucrats are continually preoccupied with uniformity and order. Uniform, rational rules and procedures, stifle spontaneity, creativity and initiative, thereby indoctrinating specialist "without spirit". "*The bureaucratic organisation makes an iron cage*"[14] Rules are often tightened, with effect of making power relations more visible and thus conflict between managers and subordinates increases. As a result the efficiency of the system declines. Furthermore, as bureaucracy is about regularity and order, during normal times of regular activity, the system may be efficient. However, if anything irregular or abnormal occurs, the rigidity of the system would hinder the ability to respond. The inflexibility of the system, is also resistant to change and evolution, thus the progress of modernisation is reluctant. Communication through the hierarchy may well be slow in a bureaucratic system, due to the tendency towards centralisation, which would affect the initiative at the lower levels.

Another argument what was purported was that in individual bureaucrats may not normally be reliable and predictable in their behaviour. At the same time his tendencies may turn means into ends. Thus as the emphasis of bureaucracy is on conformity and strict observance of the rules, it induce the individual to internalise such rules. Thus, it could be seen that instead of "*simple means, procedural regulations become ends in themselves.*"[15] In a sense, the formal aspects of bureaucracy is more important than the substantive ones (serving the client well), and the effectiveness of the whole system suffers accordingly. Moreover, these dysfunctional aspects of the system are reinforced when, as a response to the protestation of clients, the bureaucrat defends himself by behaving in a more formalistic and rigid way. Thus, as Weber's ideal type of rationality is taken away and non-rational aspects of behaviour are taken into consideration, the same structural elements may be both functional and dysfunctional effects as organisational goal achievement is considered.

Conclusion
In conclusion, bureaucracy is efficient, according to Weber, because of rationalisation. It is the process of rationalisation that leads to the construction on a rational-bureaucratic system. This bureaucratic system has ingrained characteristics of efficiency according to Weber. However, it is argued whether these characteristic are inherently efficient or does it lead to a myriad of inefficiencies. I would agree with Weber that bureaucracies are efficient, in his context, but his ideal type of bureaucracy is utopian and unable to fit in to the pragmatic world we are in today. Efficiency is a relative term, and thus to be able

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[12] Mouselis N.P. – Organisation and Bureaucracy - 1967
[13] Michel – 1962 (from Mouselis N.P.)
[14] Haralambos and Holborn – Sociology Themes and perspectives - 2000
[15] Mouselis N.P. – Organisation and Bureaucracy - 1967

to answer whether Weber's bureaucratic is system is efficient, is to judge it relative to other systems. Weber advocated a Professional Bureaucracy which characteristic made is a rational body, where the organisation has certain goals and objectives in mind. Relative to other bodies, such as a patrimonial or honorific bureaucracies, a professional bureaucracy seems to be able to reach its goals through more stable and continuous means. Thus, I believe that Weber's doctrine seems to be more efficient relative to others. However, this does not mean that Weber's rational bureaucracy is efficient but rather it is better, relative to the rest.

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