

THE Bureaucratic Experience

FIFTH EDITION

The Post-Modern Challenge

Ralph P. Hummel

THE Bureaucratic
Experience

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Ralph P. Hummel

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In Memory of

Larry D. Terry

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Foreword

I will here confess my purpose: it is to find hope that my mother tongue and my freedom to say what I want to say in my own terms will not be lost.

Ralph Hummel, 2003

The fifth edition of *The Bureaucratic Experience* transcends the traditional discourse between the critical school of bureaucratic analysis and those who find a measure of virtue in the operations of bureaucratic institutions. That is long overdue.

Traditional bureaucracy remains in place and continues to assault the social, cultural, and psychological commitments of contemporary life. It influences the way we think and speak and has profound consequences for political life.

Theorists of the critical school agree that the bureaucratic mind—the hard residue of the institution itself—is a threat to freedom. They counter the “don’t blame bureaucracy” school of thinking that places the alleged sins of bureaucracy at the feet of its political masters.

Those considerate of bureaucratic institutions applaud their contributions to the maturation of societies. Bureaucratic apologists extol the accomplishments of a misunderstood institution operating under duress.

The fifth edition of *The Bureaucratic Experience* recognizes that the choices posed in the traditional quarrel between critics and sympathizers of bureaucracy are limiting. This edition uses another perspective to shed light on the essentially two-sided debate to see if there is a fresh antithetical understanding that helps appreciate the bureaucratic experience.

The reach for a new way of thinking about bureaucracy may end the artificial duality created between critical theorists and traditionalists, who, for instance, put Hummel’s previous editions in the hands of students

along with Charles Goodsell's work, which defends bureaucracy. This is done ostensibly to create a fair debate about bureaucracy. It's a setup. Goodsell's books are more readable than Hummel's and are mainline public administration, reasonable, and hopeful. Hummel's manuscripts are more intricate, argumentative, and even contentious, taking on subjects not normally reviewed by PA students.

The books do not address the same subjects. Hummel is not writing just about bureaucracy as a kind of administrative instrument. He does not particularly care how efficient bureaucracy might be—in fact, the more smoothly it operates the more horrified he becomes. In the end, those who are comfortable with reasonableness probably prefer Goodsell and those with a predilection for the edge likely go for Hummel and probably careers away from the public service. At bottom, the issue is about comfort with high doses of rationalism or humanism.

Hummel's new edition moves away from traditional forms of debating bureaucracy. It entertains the post-modern point of view and then rejects much of it as long on deconstruction and short on faith in any future worth living. Hummel finds that post-modernism reveals much of what is happening, but offers little on what to do about it. The author acknowledges, often with a fair measure of enthusiasm, the work of several post-modernists. In the end, he finds no humanly tolerable attitude in their avowed strategy of tearing one foundation down and announcing it cannot be replaced by any other.

Deconstruction of this variety is like a union organizer who helps people see exploitation and the façade of power that dominates their lives. The workers then boil for a fight against their oppressors. They begin to rebel. The workers roar out a question about what to do, and the organizer's response is "nothing"—as if knowing alone is sufficient.

The fifth edition remains true to the idea that humans are not a form of intelligence easily replicated by machines and takes on the computer as the representation of bureaucracy itself. Chapter 6 is the gem of the text. It takes on Herbert Simon, an icon in public administration. Hummel argues that it is machines that are bounded, if not in rationality, then in sensibility and felt sense for what to do where feelings of people count in the equation, where feelings, for instance, may be a variable.

It is the proverbs of administration that dominate nearly every popular text on how to lead organizations. These days the ability to understand and choose between contingencies, not comprehensive analysis and overwhelming data, gets us through most things. "Trust your stomach"

might be worth teaching in a management course in public administration. Data are immediate and often reliable, however irrational they might seem. Inconsistent proverbs can be true in any situation. It is judgment about what to do with them that matters. It is the underlying values, the know-how born of experience, that drive judgment that is consequential. These things defy programming.

After the journey through philosophical thinking still new to public administration, the latest edition makes its way to an independent point, a tradition with this author. The soul of the book remains true to the author's lasting concern that bureaucracy continues to serve as conversion machinery, flanked by what is human and what is mechanistic, between conformism and individuality, things rules say to do and what judgment and felt sense tender. The chapter on what living in a bureaucratic world does to the psychology of people is exceptional. What happens to the *self*, assuming people are in touch with one, after the massive assault on it by institutions, allegedly benign ones, over the course of *one's existence*? How much order can one ingest, even in the spirit of good organizational citizenship, without it having some corrosive effect on one's *being in the world*—even a world that admittedly runs more efficiently and economically? Hummel goes after these questions starting with the engaging “identity is not personality.”

Each edition of *The Bureaucratic Experience* is hard at the core. Its essential concepts are unfailingly about freedom. The book is not a simple argument about the evils of bureaucracy as a mechanism for accomplishing the instrumental goals of modern society. It is too often miscast that way. The text reveals the face of the mechanical system and its implications for the human. It is not about how to get the trains running on time.

The volume is political theory in the sense demanded by John Gaus and Dwight Waldo as the precondition for administrative theory.

Everyone should be able to identify with the meaning of the title of the book—*The Bureaucratic Experience*. Who among us has not had a bureaucratic experience? You stand before the machine—the inquisitor. Even if you behave, that is, follow the rules, your humanity is compromised. The machine decides. The program chooses. The tools of the machine decide. The functionaries rule. One is fitted to the system. Woe to the person who is the deviant case.

The experience of fitting in correctly is not a simple annoyance, although we learn over time in the name of “maturity” not to lose our

equilibrium in the face of the offense. We cooperate. Still, our bureaucratic experiences are signals of something alien to our being in the world. We sense something foreign in front of us, not created for our use. It does not really matter to us, in those disquieting moments, if the machine is efficient or economical.

Perversely, the antidotes to the problems of organizational bureaucracy become TQM, “in search of excellence programs,” quality circles, reinvention, re-engineering, civil service reform, budget process reform, and other programs that sharpen the tool that stands against us. We are working on the wrong problem. We are helping the machine, not the human. It is extension of the assumption that what helps the machines aids humans in all their aspects. It is a thoroughly discredited idea, at least for people down the line in most societies.

This is a compelling text. Reading it will not reinvent anything, except perhaps ourselves. It is a classical treatment of a classic book.

David G. Carnevale
Norman, Oklahoma

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The publisher and the author wish to thank the following for their support: Charles Goodsell, for writing and maintaining a book directly opposing this book; Mel Dubnick, for upholding against all evidence that management can be a science; and Cynthia McSwain and Orion White, for taking me seriously while taking a quite different tack.

The credit for any success of this fifth edition belongs to Camilla Stivers.

Ralph P. Hummel
Akron, Ohio, and Spruce Head Island, Maine

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Prologue

Imagine an age of terror. The icons of American economic, political, and military power are attacked. Thousands die among horrific scenes of courage and sacrifice. Government attempts a defense. Civil rights are curtailed. A war on terrorism is declared. Government itself becomes terror's medium. The populace wishes nothing more than a return to normalcy. Others may disappear into secret jails supervised by secret courts, but—What's it to me? Academe promptly falls in line echoing a theme struck in an earlier crisis: “No sacrifice is too great for our democracy, least of all the temporary sacrifice of democracy itself” (Rossiter, 1963 [1948]: 314).

What would be the responsibility of scholars in such imaginary dark days? What if we can shed light on what would come next?

The fact is any twenty-first-century political leadership imagined in this scenario needs to expand the role of government. This means expanding modern organization design—bureaucracy in the strictly technical sense of rationalist administration driven by a single will. An independent civil service is a counterweight to politics and is treated as an obstacle. And this for good reason. Public administrators take an oath to defend the Constitution. Bureaucracy promises control—constitutional or not. The honor of the bureaucrat lies in obeying orders; the honor of the civil servant rests on obeying the Constitution. Leadership in hard times requires an application of government will that is coherent, direct, and certain. Civil service—with its diffuse structures and clienteles united only by a general social contract—gets in the way of executing the unified will of the moment.

A new kind of government evolves. This kind of government is no accident. It can stand only on historically prepared ground.

What would be that ground? Ironically, it is bureaucracy itself that has done the preparing. This fact emerges only when we examine what bureaucracy has already done to erode modern civilization itself. A willful government can stand more easily on grounds of society reduced to organization, culture reduced to economics, psychology reduced to identity, language reduced to information, thinking reduced to logic, and politics to administration.

It is time to apply previous analysis of bureaucracy to the question of our times. This is the question that, under the current will to power, cannot be asked with impunity. Failure to ask it, however, condemns us forever to the contempt of posterity—that dismal universal hiss of which the poet spoke to mark the sound of public scorn.

What is the future of free men and women thought capable of reasoning out their own fate and order?

This fifth edition continues that examination of bureaucracy but turns to emphasize its impact on freedom, reason, and the self-made order of a free people.

Bureaucracy—modern self-critique has shown—has been the perfectly logical structuring of the delivery vehicle for public policy. Its threat to democracy was recognized by the beginning of the twentieth century (Max Weber). The threat was enacted in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s. It has been criticized most recently by a critical school in public administration, planning, and policy analysis in the last thirty years, and also again by post-modernists.

So far I am not saying anything new. But the results resonate with all of us who have been subjected to authoritarian government. Civil society and democratic rule require independent citizens; their power base rests in the economy. Today we are without our own roots in power. We spend most of our working day in bureaucracies: modern organizations whether public or private, governmental or corporate or non-profit. There we are unmade and transformed.

The transformations by bureaucracy have been identified for nearly thirty years by a critical school that continues applying the insights of modern self-criticism rooted in modern philosophy. This school recognizes that bureaucracy transforms citizens into clients. A new kind of human beings evolves: Their psyche is made dependent and fragmented. Their social relations are reduced to masks and roles. Their values are converted from personal to procedural. Their thinking mirrors internally what the political leadership seeks externally: single-premise logic cor-

responds to single-minded government. Their speech is caught up in a pre-set matrix. And their politics is a mass politics. It matters not what political party, class, status group, or gender you belong to; the sense of isolation and impotence in the political sphere and loneliness in the social sphere pervades.

The observations of single-premise logic, isolation, impotence, and loneliness, and the search for a unified and unifying will to hold the world together—these are Hannah Arendt's. The fact that they come from a book entitled *The Origins of Totalitarianism* should not disturb anyone, though they have a resonance to those who have gone through something like this before. I am not (repeat: NOT) saying we have or will have a totalitarian government. No one can predict such an outcome from the data at hand. But I am saying that we no longer are what we say we are and that the bureaucratization of the world has made us so.

If we claim to know this much, if there is a chance that this is so, then to speak of this is our responsibility.

The Chapters

The fifth edition of *The Bureaucratic Experience* pursues the idea that bureaucracy serves as the conversion machinery for turning a project for a humanistic way of life into a mechanistic one. To deepen the argument, I lay the pattern of earlier studies alongside newer ones: modern self-criticism alongside the criticism by post-modernists. The result is a picture of bureaucracy preparing an authoritarian human condition. (See Chapters 2–7.)

It is never too soon give an early warning of totalizing trends.

Chapter 1 now updates earlier contrasts between a bureaucratized world and the Enlightenment project of the early modern world. Contrasting charts summarize the early effects in organizations against later ones in society at large.

Chapter 2 uncovers the decline of society. The early hopes for human enlightenment are contrasted with the constrictions observed by Weberians and are arrayed against the critique by post-modernists. A warning is issued against the all-too-facile transposition of the French post-modern experience onto the American playing field.

Chapter 3 is the core chapter. It takes the Enlightenment as the baseline against which bureaucratic conversion creates a new concept of human nature. It traces the collapse of modern culture to its origins: contradic-

tory assumptions of the Enlightenment and the subversive role played by bureaucracy in its implementation. Here we find a first counter-challenge to post-modernists' charge of inadequacy in modernist self-reflection. Modern critics can take credit for identifying the source of the Enlightenment project's failure. They saw this in an inversion of means and ends. The post-modern claim to be the linear successors to modernism can be questioned. In other words, modern self-criticism answered post-modernism's challenge before it was issued.

Chapter 4 exposes a scandal in psychology. Sigmund Freud posited an autonomous psyche. Modern analysis shows an autonomous psyche has no place in the workplace. Freud might have found the soul of the bourgeois, but failed to observe the condition of the worker. The worker's individual psyche is now merged with that of a manager, substituting submission and dependency for mastery and conscience. For the first time, a part of post-modernism becomes suspect of serving the system's ideological interests. The analysis finds in Jacques Lacan's new transpersonal psychology, though it denies serving bourgeois interests, a surprising echo and possible endorsement of the psyche-destroying state of affairs.

Chapter 5 shows bureaucracy's destruction of human language, the stifling of its sources in everyday life and work, and the attempt to constrain thinking within the limits of a matrix imposed by a bureaucratic grammar and vocabulary. Here the seed work of modern critics, specifically Wittgenstein and Searle, is compared with the more recent work of Derrida, Lyotard, and (not usually considered a post-modernist) Bourdieu. Both schools record an all-out attack on language, but to different effect. The modern side hopes to correct the situation by exposing control to ever greater demands for clarity and sense-making; the other side sees spaces for escape opening up precisely where control tightens.

Chapter 6 indicts bureaucracy for undermining reason. Its procedures force us to reduce thinking to an inferior form of logic that leaves us only with deadly choices. Both modern and post-modern analysis see that bureaucracy teaches us to accept thought control. But here the post-modernist criticism is forced to confess to a paradox. It attacks modern thought for misreading modernity's true position, and yet it owes its own thought to modern origins: rereading Kant, Husserl, and Heidegger. Here, Derrida provides the bridge between warnings about misuse of reason given by the first among modern philosophers (i.e., Kant) and practical problems of today—for example, the launch of a missile defense.

Chapter 7 outlines the political implications of the bureaucratic transformation of modern life. Weber, Lasswell, and Habermas already observed—and in Lasswell’s case unintentionally celebrated—the tendency of politics to devolve into administration. Among post-modernists it is perhaps Foucault who finds, in attempts to hold the political world together, the most room for escape.

In the Epilogue, I sum up the effects of the bureaucratic experience and ask how bureaucracy’s preparations can possibly lead to politics, democracy, and government as we, in a brief shining moment, used to know them.

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THE Bureaucratic
Experience

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1

Understanding Bureaucracy

One city planner, shown a plan of a road cutting through a medieval city's houses: Won't people object?

Second city planner: One must force them to be free!

—From a documentary on the medieval city of Rothenburg on the river Tauber

It was a series of random events that killed thousands and saved hundreds. Not many people did anything right that day, but not many people did anything wrong either.

—A firefighter who escaped the North Tower

What are we calling postmodernity? I'm not up to date.

—Michel Foucault

This is a practical guide to bureaucracy. Or, it will be if you can make it so. Not an easy job, when you consider: “As soon as you step into bureaucracy, the handcuffs go on your mind as well as your hand” (Ishmael al-Amin, Personal communication).

If you can't at some point in reading this say, “Yeah, that's how it is on my job, in my life,” you have not made the practical connection. This is not a message from me to you; if you understand, you understand only because in some way you already knew *what* I was going to say.

Doing something practical means letting go of some illusions and delusions. One illusion is that bureaucracy is compatible with democracy (see Goodsell, 2003). A delusion is that, whatever the faults of modern organizations, these are just anomalies that can be fixed. We all subscribe to this delusion. Without it there is no hope. Yet behind this delusion stands a grim reality. It is captured in defense computers run amuck, international aid that starves populations, but most directly in the

desperate phone call of a friend who announces, without introduction or saying who is calling:

“Ralph, it’s worse than you say it is.”

Imagine having adopted a baby. A year later, you get a phone call: “Return the baby!” “What!?” you say. “The father didn’t sign the papers,” they say.

Bureaucratic Experiences

In some way, we have all had our experiences with bureaucracy. Everyone has trouble with bureaucracy. Citizens and politicians have trouble controlling the runaway bureaucratic machine. Managers have trouble running it. Employees dislike working in it. Clients can’t get the goods from it. Teachers have trouble getting a grip on it. Students are mystified by the complexity of it.

Let’s take a closer look at what is so troubling.

Firefighters

New York firefighters are civil servants. Are they bureaucrats, too? Kicked off the fully manned rigs, some of those off-duty took the bus to the World Trade Center. Some came without clear direction. Some came without working radios. Some came against orders. All came because they heard behind the sirens and the alarms a silent call. Sixty of the total of 343 firefighters who died on 9/11 were off-duty. Would better support from the administration of the fire department have helped?

Consultants called for stricter training, routine obedience to orders, tauter command and control, better coordination with the police. These can enhance the ability to take care of our fellow human beings. Can they create or command sacrifice? (Contrast this with the Fire Department of the City of New York, 2002.)

And this is the practical case against bureaucracy. It is at the same time the moral case. Bureaucracy beats what we do freely into order, and it does so blindly. It multiplies the potential of organizations to get things done, but it does not do the doing. Bureaucracies set up the invasion of Normandy; human beings won the battle. Bureaucracy, whether too much of it or not enough, set up the organization of firefighters—it did not create the will to self-sacrifice. No matter how tough the rules, how rational the plans, how tight the tolerances and controls, some hu-