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Cultural key to bureaucratic door

1. Introduction

Rarely happens that the child is being treated with hostility from the very moment of being born. However it is the case of bureaucracy. People talk about fighting against it rather than living with it. It gets on our nerves, it takes and wastes time, it destroys goodwill, can spoil the very best sunny morning and even bring to the edge of the nervous breakdown. Is bureaucracy condemned? What can you say about a child that even his father [Weber 1947] was afraid of it?

This paper deals with the cultural side of bureaucracy. In other words we try to find in pragmatic way the cultural keys to open the bureaucratic gates. The classical model of bureaucracy is here adopted with the new approach to it suggested. The model of bureaucracy is usually seen through the principal rules sketched by Max Weber that may be universally applied. However the reality in confrontation with cultural background much differs. The first bureaucrat was the expert who could decode the Sumerian script. It was so complicated that it needed specialist whose knowledge was a power. The modern bureaucrat has also got the power as he or she “knows” the rules, procedures and contacts. However lack of competence is also a characteristic feature of bureaucracy in our times. It is the phenomenon known since the ancient times, but it is commonly accepted that bureaucracy was born in France in the XVIIth century, thus bears the French name. So the French model will function as the point of reference to compare with other varieties of it. However bureaucracy is not only the French national sport. Bureaucracy will be seen through perspectives of certain widely accepted dimensions of culture such as synchronic/sequential, collective/individual, feminine/masculine and some others.

2. Definition

The very word Bureaucracy means the power of the desk. However, initially it meant in French the cover that was used for the desk. Max Weber, who is well-known for his study of “bureaucratization of the society” and his search for the “ideal type of it” wanted to bring the order to the chaos. He was the first person that saw bureaucracy in favourable light. The typical model should consist of clearly defined hierarchy, procedures of decision making, promotions and lay-offs, division of labour, professional management, strict chain of command and legal authority. An ideal bureaucratic model should include the formal rules and regulations, thus the employees’ behaviour in the company is being guided. Impersonal treatment and lifelong career commitment are promoted. So is rationality i.e. the target should be clearly stated – the organization is to achieve its goals in the most efficient manner possible. Can any of us say anything negative about the proposed model of organization? In principle, no. But if you ask an Italian, Spanish or Arabic manager he would smile and say that it is unrealistic, as the culture in which their business operates is very much different to the universal model proposed by the German economist. Can you imagine what model it would have been if Max Weber had been of Italian, Spanish or Arabic origin? In ideal form, bureaucracy is impersonal and rational, thus based on rules rather than on ties of kinship. And this argument is understood in universalist cultures but by no means in particularist, individualist but not in collective ones. The Dutch, English or German would approve it whereas the Greek or Italian will rebuke it but nevertheless there is bureaucracy in these countries. Thus one should rather talk about French, Italian, American or British bureaucracy i.e. The national type of it. So the consequence is that the general model applies to theoretical life, to smaller or greater extent some parts of it function in one culture whereas are completely out of question in the other. The everyday reality asks for the specific distinction. In result, we may try to define bureaucracy on the general level, considering each of its ingredients separately and see to what extent each of them appears in a different cultural environment, in what proportion, so the general key to open them may be found, but then the differences could be stated. In the latter situation one should apply very different rules of addressing the person behind the desk due to the culture the bureau is settled in. Methods in one environment would not work in the other.

3. On the paper and ...on the paper

The culture, however, is not limited to the ethnic understanding of this term. Hierarchy, procedures, decision making patterns exist in every culture. The business on regional as well as global level cannot exist without it. Nevertheless there is a difference between the definition and rules and the way they look like in action. In 1946 Michel Crozier in „The Bureaucratic Phenomenon” [Crozier 1964] shows the difference between two “cultures” of bureaucrats – the one at

the top of an organization wants the quiet life due to the fulfillment of the rules but may be frustrated with the inability to push the employee to move out of the limits of the bureaucracy. The master becomes the slave, as the employee is very happy with hand-to-mouth existence that is a result of slavish adherence to the procedures, whatever they are. The bureaucratic procedures may function in this case as defence mechanism of personality. Then you face the clerk that makes a very sympathetic face towards you and at the same time claims that he/she can not do anything in your case as the rules would not allow it. Bureaucracy is a shield behind which the person being employed in the bureaucratic machinery can hide and live pretty peaceful, calm life. This is an ideal for the people that do not want to do any effort, that are afraid of making any decisions, and that prefer to live in job-security perspective than in a much more demanding but at the same time rewarding situation in which one can make decisions, have more responsibility but at the same time it is connected with risk of different kinds. This explains why thousands of young people in Parisian region – Ile de France, apply happily for the job of postman. They prefer the job-life security as civil servants than professions that would be more demanding and rewarding but at the same time more risky. The civil servant in France is the equivalent of “holly cows” in India, thus people prefer to be professionally untouchable than do the jobs that would bring them more satisfaction and reward in career development. Thus bureaucracy becomes not only the system in social and economic term but a model of life and the psychological mechanism. On the level of Maslow’s hierarchy, the French bureaucracy stops on the second stage; the first is the basic need, i.e. pay, the second is safety. The highest need to use one’s potentials is in this case inexistent but also not wished. In consequence the typical French bureaucrat would be happy to do the paper job rather than deal with human cases. The latter requires the effort. These are the reasons that are behind the perceiving bureaucracy from the negative perspective as for many bureaucrat does not make a single effort to solve the client’s problem. The bureaucrat of this type looks for not doing anything and get the things smoothed down rather than solved. When we realistically look at the Weber’s principles we see that what may work in one cultural environment does not make sense in the other. Written guidelines that help to control and instruct employees in their duties worth a lot in Switzerland or Germany but not much in Morocco or in Saudi Arabia. Impersonal treatment being seen as fair play in individualistic and universalist cultures gets very bad notes in cultures which prefer the human contact to the rules. What for the American is avoidance of favouritism that for the Algerian or Greek would be seen as unfriendly coldness and lack of human comprehension. People are not machines, would say a Spaniard whereas the Englishman would rather appreciate the division of labour into specialized tasks. If the Weber’s hierarchy structure of positions due to the authority would be highly appreciated by French, one may ask the question what is authority for

Japanese or Poles or Welsh. Do they treat this aspect of bureaucratic guidelines in the same way? Authority has got different roots that are very much culturally determined. So is lifelong career commitment. The stiff obligation that bounds the employee and the organization is not credible only because of the changes in the business market nowadays, but also because of the habits that each culture possesses. In US business environment changing jobs may be perceived positive as the seek for the new challenges, in Germany it may be treated as a signal of unstable personality that is highly unreliable. Weber wanted to create the situation in which it was not the person that give a meaning to the post as the person, its individuality does not influence the functioning of the organization. Tell it to the boss of Microsoft. However in many administrative offices it would be just the rule. If we assume that bureaucracy shows the red line between the management or the people who make decisions and those who carry them out, than it is a perfect description of the business environment in France, very unlikely in Sweden. Similar is another of Weber's assumptions i.e. the fact that promotion is based upon merit. One may get the impression that France, with its rigid rules-and-conduct procedures would be a perfect fit to the picture of ideal bureaucracy. However not in the case of promotion. In France you get promoted either because of seniority factor, and no merit is considered whatsoever or otherwise the person that is accepted in the higher rank of management would be promoted only because of the belonging to the "cast" not because of his/her accomplishments.

4. The general and specific keys. Corruption, Connections and others

Weber wanted to clarify the industrial relations in business and to obtain the most efficiency possible. And sometimes it works. However usually bureaucracy means for majority, the avalanche of paperwork and the incompetence supported by badwill of the clerks. In other words, do we have to deal with Weber's ideal or its pathological version? In reality bureaucracy has got several images, financial, economic, organizational, psychological, as defence mechanism described above, and cultural. Even if the all but last keys are respected the door cannot be open. And it is despite the existence of some general rules. The principal one is the "C and C" rule – connections and corruption. The Moroccan driver would without any hesitation give some money to the police if caught while speeding in order to avoid more serious consequences. In Tchad the innocent driver is stopped to give the money, as the police is always right. In Poland he would negotiate with the police but the final is the same. So methods are different, the result is the same, however it may seem to be very much politically incorrect to say it aloud. The very aspect of corruption is strongly culturally determined. What in one culture would be considered as an attempt to corrupt the business partner in other is treated as something completely natural. Getz and Volkema [Niskanen 1971] discussed the obviously negative aspects of corruption, however they

admitted that in many countries corruption is being tolerated. As the corruption in itself is not the subject matter of this paper the problem is just being mentioned, however it must be stated that corruption, money, presents, travels, and other forms of rewarding people for their agreement to our suggestions vary in forms and treatment in different cultures. According to Jedrmier et al. [Getz, Volkema 2001] culture is defined as the basic, taken-for-granted assumptions and patterns of meaning shared by organization participants. In this perspective one can easily understand while buying a drink could be treated in one culture as a friendly gesture in the other as a means of influencing the business partner. Needless to say the scale of offer varies from Rolls-Royce and paid two-week holidays in Mauritius to the personalised present that may be always interpreted as a gesture of care not of bribery, as Goleman [Goleman 1997] states “bribery is a normal part of doing business in much of the world, a fact that makes Americans indignant”. From the point of view of ethics, bribery or corruption is the meanest of the mean. However not every culture share this value. Thus each culture would have different interpretations of corruptions and different keys – one must know what should be given to whom, when, and in what situation. Do these words sound cynical? No – they are reflection of the reality; the description rather than prescription, which would sound shocking to Norwegians, Australians or British but not to Russians, Poles and people from Democratic Republic of Kongo. This paper is not to give lessons to anybody, it is to describe the facts. And in this logic comes the second “C” – that stands for Connections. French system “D” – “debrouiller” means sorting out of difficult situations. In everyday life it may refer to the way the French may enjoy going to restaurants once a week despite the sudden drop of their financial situation. In French version of bureaucracy in which they grow up, and which air they breathe from the early childhood, they know that system “D” will work. For the others it is nightmare. The British, having had the passport for 20 years, was to learn that why renewing it he must show the birth certificate from the central office in Nantes. Of course such document did not exist in Nantes as the guy was born in East Sussex. The old passport was not sufficient proof of his French citizenship. Laredo [Laredo, Laredo 2004] The examples like that may be quoted in endless numbers, not only in relation to French culture. Polly Platt [Platt 1994] writes that the French law is exceedingly (from British or American point of view) complicated and time-consuming procedures for applying the rules. Whatever document you need means a series of visits to the state institutions involved and interminable waits. The Sumnerian scribe comes to mind. The system “D” in France offers the way to go through it without losing the time and nerves – find the right person to get you on the other side of the bureaucratic river. But it needs skills, knowledge and knowing people. What to do if you have got the first two but not the latter?

5. Frog versus Uncle Sam. Case study

America is a vast country. It is a melting pot of cultures. So the pragmatic logic that founded the industrial relations in this country is that the variety exists. If this is the case than the multiple offers and possibilities are taken into account. The American bureaucracy is like a box filled with thousands wholes that predict all possible solutions and possibilities. French, on the contrary has got two wholes – “you will get the residents permit when you get work, you will get work when you get the residents permit”. The American students stand stupified in front of such bureaucratic reality, the students from black Africa form the regiments of illegal immigrants who legally work in France paying taxes however not having a right to stay on the French soil. Using the French approach in America you fail, using the American approach in France is also condemned to lack fo success.

Let's have look at one of the skiing resorts in Chicago area. The guy from Europe brought with him skiing boots and wants to hire skis nad ski poles. Impossible, as the whole gear is being rented. He may pay for all but wants his boots be fixed to the bindings. Impossible as the staff has not authority to do so. He will fix them himself. Not possible as the inssurance company would be a problem if an accident occurs. Living in French bureaucratic system he did not even think of appealing to higher managment. This is the solution for US beaucracy. In France do not do it. The French they still live in feudal hierarchy of the Kings whom so successfyully they decapitated in the French Revolution. But Republic does not mean change in “monarchy od bureaucracy”. So the manager defends the employee in case of attack from the client as he or rearely she, assumes, that my employee belongs to me and like a feudal master he or she must protect the person. Client is a common enemy. In US bureaucratic environment it is better to apply to manager who has got more responsibilities thus wider range of decision making possibilities. In France a sort of solution is to convince the manager that the client is on his/her side. There is no sense in trying to proof that right or law is on the customer's side. The cleint is always guilty and is an unnecessary obstacle that makes working difficult. The client in the French office must make the clerk feel that his/her position is powerful and much above the abilities and possibilites of the client. From the point of view of responsibilities and decision making American bureaucracy is similiar to Eiffel Tower being put upside down. French is also Eiffel Tower – the managers on the top are few but it is assumed they have wider perception.

6. Women, Man, and Smile

The stereotype kicks back in Marocco. It is assumed that a place of a woman in Arabic world is in the kitchen and in the sleeping room. However, it is not the case od Marocco or Libya. The male client in the office would be send back with empty hands. The women clients can achived her targets in the office and in the administration. The Maroccan bureaucrat would show impatience and show

a door to the male client. However many writers suggest that in negotiations in Arabic countries it is better not to include in the group the woman in the leading position.

An important aspect in opening the bureaucratic gate is a body language and smile. In French office the client should make impression of a helpless, lost creature whose only hope is the powerful bureaucrat. The face must be serious. The smile is being understood as a challenge of the position so the clerk would prove who is more powerful. The smile is left for the final conclusion when the problem is over. Then is a place for a more relaxed, friendly gestures. You may smile to the unknown person in the street but not to the important clerk behind the important desk. Of course the smile is inscribed in body language and communication patterns in a given culture. The function of smile in Japan is different to the one in Britain. So is with eye contacts. If on the London Tube it is a rude gesture to look into somebody's eyes intensively, in Parisian metro it may be treated as an aggression, while in Rome is absolutely acceptable. It will be difficult to smile to the Russian bureaucrat as the smile in this cultural environment is a rare phenomenon, however in particularist culture smile at the entrance may be treated as a positive gesture.

Abstract

This paper does not claim to be the most thorough study of bureaucracy from the cultural perspective. It is rather an attempt to use some examples and cases that help to prove that bureaucracy existing in every place in the world, apart from its social and economic aspect possesses also the cultural face. However, we try desperately to separate from stereotypes and thus the more typical patterns of behaviour in bureaucratic environment were described.

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