

## Bureaucracy and Beyond: Public Administration, Knowledge, Power\*

관료제와 그것의 한계를 넘어:  
공공행정, 지식, 그리고 권력

Lavinia Bifulco \_Università di Milano-Bicocca

라비니아 비폴코 \_밀라노 비코차 대학교

In continuity with the long-standing analysis conducted in the international debate, this concise and dense book by Gianfranco Poggi discusses the theme of bureaucracy.

Its subtitle – *Natura and patologie* – reflects only some of the issues addressed by the book and its approach. In fact, bureaucracy is analysed as an intrinsically ambivalent phenomenon with both merits and pathologies. Moreover, as one understands from the final pages, the author is concerned at least as much by the neoliberal approaches to public administration as by the limitations of traditional bureaucracy.

The book therefore belongs within the minor but important strand of sociological and political science analysis of bureaucracy that recognizes its virtues without denying its vices. Among the most interesting contributions of this strand mention should certainly be made of *In praise of bureaucracy*, a fine book by Paul du Gay (2000) published some years ago. This book is not a nostalgic reminiscence

---

\* Book review on Gianfranco Poggi, *La burocrazia. Natura e patologie (The Bureaucracy. Nature and Pathologies)*, Roma-Bari: Laterza. 2013.

but an impassioned analysis which reverses the interpretative perspective that neo-liberalism has made dominant. That bureaucracy is a slew of problems is one of the assumptions most widely taken for granted, and in part it can be endorsed. Moreover, it is necessary to consider the horrors associated with bureaucracy in the last century: the Holocaust, but also totalitarianism. But, as Poggi argues, bureaucracy, the institutional crucible of Western modernity, has also been a driver of civilization and democratization. And post-bureaucracy, for its part, is not as virtuous as it seems.

Let us proceed in order. The first part of the book concentrates on the development and nature of the bureaucratic model. Drawing on his detailed knowledge of Weber, Poggi immediately focuses on the relationship between bureaucracy and political power.

The first chapter examines the Weberian thesis of the importance of administration as an essential component of government. The focus is on bureaucratization as a crucial juncture in the modernization process which, via rationalization, transformed the relationship between the political system and society, and led to the superseding of the traditional administrative system. Poggi cites not only the technical superiority of bureaucracy but also its close relationship with political processes like constitutionalization and democratization, as well as its unique ability to meet the needs of the capitalist economy and the modernizing economic elites. Within this framework, the analysis briefly deals with various issues, each crucial in its own way: the advantages of bureaucratization, the new role of the sovereign, and the theme of legitimacy.

The second chapter provides a 'conceptual portrait' of modern bureaucracy based on the Weberian ideal-type: the reference to rules and the *sine ira ac studio* nature of administrative action is obviously of central importance. But the author's main concern seems to be a cluster of questions connected with the political aspects of bureaucracy:

- the inherent contradiction between, on the one hand, the principles of legality and impartiality to which administrative action responds, and on the other, the partisan and discretionary nature of political action. A related risk is the loss of autonomy by functionaries and bureaucrats. Of help in countering this risk are both job protection mechanisms and the reference to professionalism – that is, specialist expertise – as a criterion that reassures politicians of the reliability of bureaucratic action.
- The asymmetric relationship between administration and citizens. Bureaucracy is considered to be primarily an agent of civilization in that it grants citizens' "legitimate demands" gives "public importance to their interests", and "has a nature in principle egalitarian even in relationships where the functionary commands and the citizen obeys" (p. 49).
- The risk that discretionality – a necessary component of administrative action especially in situations of unpredictability – may degenerate into arbitrariness. Also in this case, bureaucratic knowledge is a resource with which bureaucrats can implement a "well-tempered" discretionality.

As will be seen, one of the main components of the argument is the role of bureaucratic knowledge with its specific characteristics as rational knowledge both legal and technical. As Poggi writes a few pages later: "The distinctive feature of bureaucracy ... is that it bases on knowledge ... the structure of the system as a whole" (p. 63).

The second part of the book focuses on the pathologies of bureaucracy: those in default due to insufficient accomplishment of the bureaucratic model; and those in excess, i.e. due to excessive development of the model's characteristics. The array of pathologies is almost obvious: resistance to innovation, an inability to adapt to the specificities of concrete cases, the development of corporative interests, self-referentiality, hyper-proceduralism, indifference to results, the rigidity of the hierarchy. Not obvious, however, is the clarity in investigating the ambivalence of these pathologies. For example, the hierarchy is not only a constraint but also a resource for functionaries, because it represents the career opportunities that they can access.

Here bureaucracy ceases to be a model (an ideal-type) and becomes populated by actors, interests, and conflicts. A key chapter is the one devoted to subversion of the agency relationship: the issue is once again the relationship between political system and bureaucracy. Poggi examines various sources of tension, primarily the conflict between the bases of legitimacy for political and bureaucratic action. Michels's notion of the iron law of oligarchy is invoked to construe the relationship between the political centre and the administrative component, and its subversion.

Rapid but incisive is the reference to the technocratic project, i.e. on the alliance between bureaucracy and science/technology which – although more a matter of rhetoric than actual practice – is the most complete expression of the power of knowledge in undermining “the autonomy and importance of political dialectic” (p. 92).

The last part of the book – the author warns us – is the most polemical and the least dispassionate. Its purpose is to dispute some of the neoliberal assumptions concerning bureaucracies and public administrations. This endeavour is likely to be arduous, given the large amount of issues involved. Poggi's argument proceeds through two main stages.

The first is to question the neoliberal thesis that the problems of bureaucracy pertain exclusively the public sector. Therefore highlighted are the features shared by public bureaucracies and market firms: in particular, the importance assumed by large companies that replicate the bureaucratic pyramid (as also Perrow, 2002, has well described); problems due to the dispersion and opacity of responsibilities within firms; and the lack of competitiveness that characterizes many forms of oligopoly or imperfect competition. The second stage consists in analysis of the relationship between public action and knowledge, which, as said, is of central importance for bureaucracy. In this case the reference is to the economics as a body of knowledge which, under neoliberalism, structures concepts and strategies concerning the relationship between state and market. The argument is close-knit and

insistent. First, the use of the mathematical modelling typical of economics leads to abstract conceptions of the market. But juxtaposed and contrasted with these abstract models are analyses (usually pitiless) of the public bureaucracy based on empirical reality. Also contested is the meaning that efficiency assumes in the neo-liberal system.

The fact is that, contrary to what we are led to believe, this notion “expresses a value judgement, not a scientific truth” (p. 136). In other words, it is political in nature. More precisely: “the neoliberal absolutization of efficiency is a legitimate *political* stance that seeks to give an acceptable or contestable orientation to public opinion, not a scientific theorem. ... There is no scientific reason why the general public, and political choices, cannot instead privilege, systematically or occasionally, criteria other than efficiency” (p. 137). The issue of hegemony must perforce be addressed in order to understand how a way of thinking and organizing the world has established itself through contacts among scientists, international organizations, and think tanks.

These two stages constitute the analysis which Poggi, drawing on Durkheim’s notion of the non-contractual conditions of the contract, focus on certain critical aspects of neoliberalism: its ambiguous relationship with democracy; the erosion of the public realm and of the meaning itself of politics; and the impact of marketization on sport, health, and scientific research – in particular on the relationship between pure and applied research and the mechanisms of the production, circulation and use of knowledge.

In conclusion to the book, Poggi reiterates an important step in his argument: some neoliberal criticisms of the public bureaucracies are justified, and some merit must be given to the market. What must be challenged is the claim at the basis of neoliberalism that the market should act as the organizing principle of society as a whole. As regards public administration, this claim clashes with a fundamental principle: that the public decision-making powers are bound to pursue collective

interests, these being their sources as well as their limits (they are thus derived powers). The fact that this principle is misapplied does not mean that it can or should be discarded.

The book has many merits. Compared with kindred studies and perspectives, one appreciates its breadth of treatment whereby, in a few pages, analysis ranges from premodernity to the present day. Another merit of the book is its ability to raise a wide array of issues and show the connections among them.

From my point of view, to be stressed in particular is the importance of the above-mentioned approach centred on the relationship among administration, politics, and knowledge/expertise. This approach – little used in the current debate – sheds light on bureaucracy and its neoliberal alternatives, on their similarities and differences. In doing so, it brings new and valuable arguments to the debate on what public, what state, and what politics we have today, and what we could have.

To summarize Poggi's argument somewhat drastically, its focus on knowledge yields understanding of the characteristics and problems of administrative action but also, and especially, of the tensions and short-circuits between bureaucracy and politics. In the Weberian administration, rational knowledge operates as an instrument of legitimacy, as well as being crucial for a balance between functions and powers. But this does not conceal or deny the contradiction and tension that characterizes the relationship between administration and politics. In the neoliberal model, economic/mathematical knowledge de-politicizes decisions, or politics as a whole, with all that this implies in terms of the impoverishment and decline of public life.

This perspective, which enlightens the normative force and the performative capacity of economic science in particular, has many features in common with studies that, in various ways, concern themselves with the relationship between public action and knowledge. These studies include:

- approaches centred on the informational bases of policies, investigating the effects of the performative knowledge and information incorporated in public decisions, and their implications for democracy (Salais, 2008; de Leonardis, Negrelli, Salais eds, 2012);
- study of accounting practices and rituals in public administrations (Power, 1997);
- the sociology of quantification, which in France has mainly developed around the reflection of Alain Desrosières (1993) on the relationship between state-building and the development of statistics;
- analysis of policy instruments that consider, among other things, the role performed by techniques such as the evaluation or establishment of standards (Lascoumes, Le Galès, eds., 2004).

Needless to say, this perspective also encompasses reflections on knowledge and power, in particular Foucault's notion of governmentality. Indeed, Poggi's book begins and ends by discussing power. This serves as a reminder, if one were needed, of what lies behind the mantle of the proceduralism that unites the Weberian bureaucracy with its neoliberal and managerialized counterpart.

Because I entirely agree with this view, my final comments have solely the purpose of contributing to articulate it further. Especially, but not only, if one reasons in terms of alternative perspectives, it is important to pay closer attention to the role of citizens with respect to public administration, politics, and the expert knowledge bound up with them. Apparent especially at the local level are administrative procedures based on inclusive decision-making practices which involve citizens and communities in the creation of the informational basis of collective choices. Such schemes are not particularly frequent, but they illustrate how the public interest can be achieved by including the public in its definition.

The Weberian administration and the neoliberal model of New Public Management have many similarities, as well as differences. And, as Béatrice Hibou (2012), has well shown, both contribute, in dissimilar ways, to the bureaucratization process that has transformed societies. But they do not exhaust the possibilities.

Of course, the alternative experiences are minoritarian, heterogeneous, and highly ambiguous. Moreover, according to some scholars, they are an expression of the variegated neoliberalism (Peck, Tickell, 2002). Nevertheless, they should be taken seriously if one wants to understand the opportunities and conditions on which our public life can count today and in the future.



## References

- De Leonardis O., Negrelli S., Salais R. eds. 2012. *Democracy and Capabilities for Voice*. Bruxelles: Peter Lang.
- Desroières A. 1993. *La Politique des Grands Nombres; Histoire de la Raison Statistique*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Du Gay P. 2000. *In Praise of Bureaucracy*. London. Sage.
- Hibou B. 2012. *La bureaucratisation du monde*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Lascoumes P., Le Galès P. eds. 2004. *Gouverner par les instruments*. Paris: Presses de Sciences-Po.
- Peck J, Tickell, A. 2002. "Antipode", *Neoliberalizing Space*, 34, 380-404.
- Perrow C. 2002. *Organizing America: Wealth, Power and the Origins of Corporate Capitalism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Power M. 1997. *The Audit Society. Rituals of Verification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Salais R. 2008. "Capacités, base informationnelle et démocratie délibérative. Le (contre)-exemple de l'action publique européenne." in J. de Munck e B. Zim-mermann (dir). *La liberté au prisme des capacités. Amartya Sen au-delà du libéralisme*, Raisons pratiques, Paris: Editions de l'Ehess. vol. 18. 297-326.