

PART FIVE:
CULTURE AND BEHAVIOR

DEMOCRACY AT WORK IN THE SWEDISH BUREAUCRACY

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INTRODUCTION

The general concern of this article is the relationship of public bureaucracy to the wider society it ostensibly serves. In earlier discussions I set forth the argument that for any unit of organization the level above provides the purpose for its activity while the one below provides the mechanism (Fred 1978, 1979). Hence the role of any level in an organizational hierarchy is situational in that it changes in terms of the level to which it is relating. In the case of a bureaucracy, it is society which provides the purpose for an agency's activities, while it is the bureaucracy which contributes the mechanism for the society's functioning. Moreover, within any institution the same relationship between higher and lower levels holds true; thus, in analyzing bureaucratic organization and its relation to wider society, one is in actuality distinguishing between different levels of relationship that—in terms of mechanism/purpose—are analogous to each other.

This model—albeit a simplified one—does suggest a framework for examining the basis of one of the main concerns of Western political democracies, reflected in continual complaints about the increasing incursions of bureaucracy into political and daily life. This is certainly not a new concern, nor is it confined to Western societies, as witnessed in one relatively recent example, the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In his discussion of the state administration vis-à-vis civil society, Marx noted what he perceived as a source of the ambiguity between the two: “. . . bureaucracy is a formal system for content lying outside it. . . . [It] appears to itself as the ultimate purpose of the state” (1974:106-107). Reformulated in this paper, such ambiguity will be viewed in terms of a symbolic merging of purpose and mechanism in which bureaucracy, created as a mechanism for carrying out specific purposes or social goals, comes to be identified with the purpose itself.

SWEDISH ADMINISTRATION

I shall approach this issue by considering a case related to efforts to democratize decision making in the Swedish public bureaucracy. To summarize that country's administrative system, there has been at the national level a traditional division of functions between relatively small ministries, which formulate policies then acted upon by parliament, and the much larger boards, which administer those policies within the framework established by the ministry. Ideally the ministries are expected to refrain from interfering in the daily administrative activities of the boards under their jurisdiction, while the boards in turn are expected to leave policy to the ministries.

These formal boundaries have become increasingly blurred by changing nuances in the role behavior of public administrators. In his study of Swedish political culture, Thomas Anton summarizes the types of such behavior according to the extent to which public officials “adopt an active or passive stance toward their responsibilities, and the extent to which officials adopt

an open or closed posture toward other political institutions” (1980:18). At the one end of the continuum one finds Weber’s classical bureaucrats (passive/closed) whom Anton then contrasts with what he calls political bureaucrats (active/open). These latter have come to dominate Sweden and other Western administrative systems as a result of public demands for reform and social planning. In terms of my earlier comments on the merging of social purpose and mechanisms, this role alteration implies a simultaneous “politicization of bureaucracy” and “bureaucratization of politics” in which the effect has been to enhance the Swedish public administrators’ overall power and influence by allowing them “to impose a markedly rationalistic style on policy-making procedures” (Anton 1980:6).

DEMOCRACY AT WORK ACT

On January 1, 1977, a new law came into effect in Sweden, which was intended to enable employees through their representative organizations to exert some influence over the management of their work. This law, henceforth to be referred to by its initials MBL (Medbestämmandelagen), has been translated as the “Democracy at Work Act” or the “Codetermination Act” and was meant to serve as an umbrella statute furnishing guidelines for collective agreements to be concluded between workers and employer representatives. Only as a last resort was the state to intervene, “providing an efficient conciliation and judicial procedure enjoying the confidence of both sides” (Bouvin 1977:4).

This general policy regarding democratization of working life was simultaneously extended in a complementary Public Employment Act (Lagen om Offentlig Anställning, or LOA) to include those working in national and local government jobs. At the heart of the act pertaining to the public sector was the notion that the integrity of the democratic sovereignty of the people must be maintained. Therefore, it was deemed necessary that the negotiations for public employees’ rights would not undermine the “autonomy of public authorities embodying the will of the electorate” (Bouvin 1977:13). While public employees were to have a considerable degree of influence on their working conditions, they were not to usurp policy-making authority from parliament and the ministries. These limitations were noted in a government publication of MBL:

All enfranchised persons—public employees included—are able by their votes to influence decisions concerning the activities to be conducted by national and local authorities, the Public Employment Act observes. It would be contrary to the established democratic order in Sweden—as expressed above all in the 1974 Instrument of Government Act—to allow public employees to obtain through the medium of collective agreements another, more direct form of influence than is exerted by other citizens on the *aims* [goals], *direction*, *scale*, and *quality* of the activities of public authorities. . . . It should be the task of political bodies and, in the event of delegation, administrative boards and other authorities to decide which types of activity an authority is to engage in . . . [Swedish Ministry of the Budget 1978:24-25].

During the years since its enactment, the various parties in the negotiation process in both private industries and public agencies have been engaged in attempts to agree upon common interpretations of the law in order to establish forms under which future decisions can be made.¹ Many of the frustrations expressed by those who have at one time or another been involved in the MBL may be due to the uncertainty regarding new norms for negotiating behavior. Particularly within the public sector, where individuals have often been socialized to respond to bureaucratic hierarchical command, the demands for new patterns of behavior require them to reevaluate the structural situation in which they are working.

THE CASE

This case concerns events in a particular section within the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen), an administrative arm of the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs (Socialdepartementet). To describe its position in the overall organization of the board, this Refugee Section was a subunit of the Division for Social Welfare, which in turn was one of three divisions comprising the Department for Long-Term Care (Avdelning LÅ: Långtidsvård och Åldringsvård). The purpose of the section had been to see to the psychological and physical welfare of incoming refugees in order to promote their integration into Swedish society. The section was composed of about twenty individuals, some of whom were involved with reimbursing localities for services provided refugees, and others (called *konsulents*),² who dealt with more general problems relating to refugees. Among their duties were providing information about and to immigrants and refugees; organizing conferences for the special group of social workers who worked with refugees and Gypsies (discussed in Fred 1979); gathering material on the psychological and social problems of various groups of immigrants and refugees; checking the medical facilities at refugee camps, which were under the rubric of the Labor Market Board; and participating in various conferences and courses, often as lecturers.³

On August 22, 1978, my first day of fieldwork in the section, the various *konsulents* were sitting together critically reviewing for subsequent comment a year's study on refugees which had been released several months earlier by the Ministry of Labor. Suddenly one of their number, who had been absent that morning on union affairs, came into the room and announced that the National Board of Health and Welfare was submitting a proposal to its ministry to cut the section's staff by about 80%. Activities that had been carried out by the section were to be transferred to the board's county representatives as part of a concerted effort at decentralization and decreased spending at the national level. The shocked silence in the room was quickly supplanted by comments from everyone. The previous discussion was suspended so that data could be marshalled for the upcoming battle over the section's existence.

The elimination of the section's personnel was viewed by those making the decision as being consistent with the board's overall administrative aims of disengaging itself from particular cases and concerning itself primarily with providing a theoretical and practical framework for local authorities. The *konsulents* viewed their candidacy for decentralization as based on a fallacious understanding of their job. They discovered that they had been victims not only of earlier demands for decentralization but also government requests in the spring of 1978 that the various boards make efforts to cut their budgets. Most serious, however, was the fact that no one in the section seemed to have been aware that such a decision was pending. It had been during the summer, when many officials were on vacation, that meetings took place within the board to discuss those activities that were to be given priority. Thus, at the end of the summer, when the announcement of the section's demise was presented as a *fait accompli*, it not only came as a shock but pointed to a possible breach of the legislation governing the joint regulation of working life, the MBL.

The Meeting

The next morning a meeting was held. It was attended by the section personnel and representatives of the two unions to which employees in the section belonged.⁴ The meeting was divided into two phases, the first involving the entire section (minus its director, whose absence will be discussed later), two high union officials, and two other board officials from organizational levels above the section (i.e., division and department). In the second phase the board officials left, but the union representatives remained. The meeting from the section's standpoint could be described as an attempt to reveal details of the past months' activities and to determine responsibility for the present crisis. Not surprisingly, the process of pinning

blame became one of "passing the buck" in which all involved denied willful complicity.

The board's position as stated by the two officials was that the decision was essentially one of policy, based on the notion that the konsulents' activities would be more effective if transferred to the local level. However, they stated that the report to be submitted to the ministry should be viewed only as a recommendation, with the possibility still remaining for alterations. Finally, they stated that during the summer when the economic secretariat had met to determine future priorities at the board, the division director had been acting department head and did not have on hand all the materials necessary for an objective decision (because the head of the refugee section was also on vacation).

The union representatives, for their part, said that they had not been given the expected five to ten days to consider their recommendations and prepare for the upcoming negotiations on organizational changes. They were extremely disappointed that information had not been distributed properly, thus hindering them in making the necessary contacts with their members.

Those working in the section stated that they had received no information regarding the pending decision. If, as had been claimed, a memorandum had been sent to the division, why had no copy been forwarded to the Refugee Section? Moreover, they said, the description of the konsulents' job, on which the decision for their elimination had been based, was incorrect; the board would be transferring services that did not exist to the extent claimed. Finally, as far as budget cutting went, the funds for the section came from a special source outside the board's regular budget, so that the deletion of konsulents would not represent any belt tightening on its part and in fact might end up costing society much more because social workers in each of Sweden's county administrations would have to take over the section's responsibilities.

After presentation of these positions, the two board officials left and the section's members with their union representatives began to plan the presentation of their case before the board's steering committee as a example of the failure of the board's leadership to follow the principles set forth in MBL/LOA.

The Aftermath

From the day in August 1978, when the section came to hear of plans for its future, morale had declined sharply. The konsulents in particular had been forced to work under conditions of uncertainty, a situation that hampered them in their contacts with localities and in their continued guidance of social workers directly involved with refugees. By the beginning of 1980 it seemed that despite a temporary reprieve to the section given by the government, decentralization would take place, although the exact date was still uncertain. By the end of 1980 most of the konsulents had left their jobs within the section, and it now appeared that in the near future, in place of the Refugee Section there would be a special section of four or five individuals entrusted with activating and overseeing issues of concern to all immigrants for the entire National Board of Health and Welfare.

A UNION REPRESENTATIVE CONSIDERS MBL

The following segment is based on an interview with the representative for the union to which the vast majority of those in the Refugee Section belonged. His comments are not only instructive in clarifying many of the problems that must be dealt with if MBL/LOA is to be used effectively but are also revealing of the structural and operational realities in the Swedish public bureaucracy. While the following is a paraphrase of remarks made by one individual with experience in negotiations, his observations represent many of the attitudes expressed by those involved in the crisis:

It would perhaps be better to consider MBL/LOA not as providing in its present form the right to codetermination, as implied in its name, but rather the right to take part in negotiations, to be present when many decisions are being made. In this sense the biggest change that has occurred in the public arena since MBL's inception has been that union representatives (the above example excepted) have been receiving better information, particularly regarding personnel policy, which is the major concern of unions at the institutional level.⁵

The problems with MBL should not be underestimated. Many of those at the higher levels are still not aware of how MBL functions. In the case of the Refugee Section, those who had made the decision claimed that they had spoken to several individuals in the division, interpreting this as sufficient in following the guideline about keeping employees informed.

Another difficulty for the union in this case was that other units within the board were also to be relocated or eliminated; if the union had decided to take a position regarding each group it would have come close to interfering with the policy-making process. (In fact, the government has taken the decision regarding the board's actual reorganization out of reach of MBL by placing it in the hands of a special committee on organization, which as a government-delegated authority is immune from MBL consideration.) Hence, the union decided to concentrate on the job security of its members rather than on particular activities, i.e., that members would be guaranteed other meaningful work. This in itself requires great effort, for despite a law regarding job security [Swedish Ministry of Labor 1977], individuals whose work roles are eliminated or in today's parlance "rationalized away" may find themselves with salaries but without any meaningful work. The personal sense of insecurity that ensues leads many of them to feel continuously threatened and forced to seek jobs outside the board.⁶ It is thus in the area of personnel policy that unions at the institutional level come to concentrate their efforts within the framework of MBL. It is the unions' function to emphasize that the employers' demands for efficiency and effectiveness cannot be satisfied through the total sacrifice of workers' rights.

One risk with MBL is that in order to function effectively within the bureaucracy, the union will be forced to create its own bureaucratic hierarchy of decision making, leaving most individual members still unaware of their rights.⁷ Since so many within the bureaucracy have been socialized into a chain of command where orders are followed from those above, it is necessary to teach the forms for democratic participation so that, from the employees' side, decision-making power may be delegated among all the members. Democracy itself is a difficult process, and it is necessary to develop forms for its realization. Otherwise, the chaos or informality ensuing may lead to a situation in which only those who yell loudest will be heard, disregarding the needs of most workers.

The MBL as such may be viewed as another step in the evolutionary process of democratization of decision making in private and public employment in Sweden. This particular case represents a point in time in which individuals, unsure of the correct procedures for securing their rights within the MBL framework, are involved in a process of learning the means of negotiation and testing the acceptability of various practices within the confines of the law, a process often beset with disappointment. In the next section, I shall examine what information the above case history can provide from the perspective both of public bureaucratic institutions and of society in general.

THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

Because the *raison d'être* of MBL/LOA is to provide individual workers with a basis for determining aspects of their work milieu, we must look at the principles on which patterns of decision making within the bureaucratic organization are based. The initial stages of an MBL negotiation may be viewed as entailing both the identification of lines of authority and the delineation of behavioral norms for the roles of employer/employee or superior/subordinate.

In public bureaucracy such delineation is complicated by the fact that MBL is based implicitly on the notion of a rather clear dichotomy between employer and employee. In a setting where all in a sense are employees, this dichotomy must be translated into a series of superior/subordinate relationships which in turn are defined by the situational contexts of decision making.⁸ Even here the role identification of the individual is fraught with ambiguity as he or she is faced with a certain element of choice. The role expectations of each individual within a bureaucracy are determined both by his group affiliation and by hierarchical patterns. Within the National Board of Health and Welfare, for example, an individual is at once a member of a subsection, section, division, department, and the entire board. The particular decision-making context thus becomes a general framework in which individuals perceive their roles and attempt to express them to others as ones in which they are acting as "employer" or "employee."

A good illustration of this problem is the situation of the head of the Refugee Section. At one time he himself was a union representative, but with the introduction of MBL he viewed this position as posing a problem of potential conflict of interest, and gave up his union duties. Moreover, at the time of the crisis he behaved in such a way as to suggest that he identified with board leadership or at least with that at the level above the section. He neither attended the section's meeting with union representatives nor signed the appeal letter the section staff later presented to the board's steering committee. Several members of the section expressed to me confusion and suspicion about his part in the whole affair. He himself described his dilemma as one of conflict between the roles of employer and employee. I would suggest that it might also be expressed in terms of his choice of identification with those determining the section's purpose or with the section itself, which provided the mechanism for carrying out particular goals, and that this confusion at an individual level is analogous with that represented in the relationship between public bureaucracy and the wider society.

Without drawing absolute conclusions as to the total impact of MBL in the public sector, it may at least be stated that the process of applying it has had the effect of forcing participants to differentiate between those rules which are necessary for maintaining efficiency and those which have developed as a result of an arbitrary use of power through control over the channels of communication. While in the short run MBL has the positive effect of distributing more information throughout the hierarchy, the long-term organizational effects may be open to question. For example, we can theorize that in 1978 the social consensus necessary for working within the Refugee Section depended to a degree on the ambiguity of its leader's role, providing him with a flexibility that was lost when he was "forced" to identify openly with those above the section. On the other hand, identifying with the section would have hindered his relationship with the divisional and departmental leaders. Finally, as relations of superior/subordinate become emphasized within the institution itself as a means of guaranteeing greater involvement in decision making, the problem remains as to the repercussions such a process will have on attitudes and behavior regarding the relation between bureaucratic institutions and the general society.

THE LEVEL OF SOCIETY

In preparation for an international conference to be held in Sweden, a Swedish public agency commissioned an English translation of a description of its organization and activities. Working directly from the Swedish, the translator began: "The X Agency is organized on the basis of a decision-making hierarchy, with a Director-General at its apex. . . ." Several days after completion, it came to the translator's attention that the head of the agency had been displeased with the initial reference to hierarchically organized decision making and that the entire pamphlet had been withdrawn in order to check its contents and phraseology more carefully. This incident, told to me while I was in the midst of my field research in the Swedish bureaucracy, seemed to encapsulate an ideological difficulty that often faces those who work in the public sector. As greater demands for economic equality and participation in decision making are being made in the wider society, there is a determination within the bureaucracy to undercommunicate what are perceived as nonegalitarian/hierarchical features which tend to contrast it with ideals predominant in the wider society. Another attempt to deal with this discrepancy was partially symbolized in a celebrated case in the 1960s in which the then director of the National Board of Health and Welfare requested that the formal address form "ni" be replaced in daily contacts by a general use of the familiar "du."

Beyond the numerical significance of the public sector, in which about 30% of Swedish employees work (Swedish Ministry of the Budget 1978:11), there is the added significance that it encompasses within its organizational boundaries the distinct categories by which society is ordered. While the bureaucracy may first symbolize these categories and their related features, its instrumental nature requires that it act upon that ordering system, and it does so in such a way so as to maintain a similarity between itself and society in order to ensure more efficient administration. This leads to a problem, not unique to Sweden, in which the bureaucracy ostensibly created as a response to needs in society reverses its relation with its "master" and takes control.

This reversal has both ideological and structural ramifications. Anton notes the former in drawing attention to the relevance of Mannheim's comment in *Ideology and Utopia* that "the fundamental tendency of all bureaucratic thought is to turn all problems of politics into problems of administration" (Anton 1980:8). With regard to the structural aspect, there is the fact that to maintain political control over policy formulation there is a need for specialization within representative bodies similar to the administrative bureaucracy that is to be overseen. It is not merely the growth of the public sector but rather this bureaucratic organization of the structure of the political establishment that may lie at the heart of fears regarding the perceived threat of bureaucracy to democratic institutions.

That bureaucratic control is not always apparent and hence is difficult to correct can be understood if the relation between bureaucracy and society is seen in terms of a dialectic between actual power relations and symbolic action. It is the interdependence of these two variables in the dialectic which can lead to an inversion of the dominance patterns originally intended. Here MBL/LOA is instructive. In its applicability to the public sector, the law formally recognizes the need to maintain the sovereignty of civil society over the bureaucracy. Because each institution is to reach agreement between employer and employee, MBL directs its attention to the level of mechanism (provided by bureaucracy) and not to that of purpose (provided by society). In fact it explicitly forbids interference in the latter realm. MBL/LOA in stating society's control over bureaucracy is asserting a separation between bureaucratic mechanism and purpose. At the same time, by focusing attention on actual power relations within the bureaucracy so as to lead to greater internal democracy, the MBL/LOA expresses bureaucracy's resemblance to society. Symbolically, then, in terms of mechanism, bureaucracy is operationally similar to society (i.e., both are based on democratic principles), while in terms of purpose it is subordinate to society. The problem is that an emphasis on developing equivalent democratic processes within the bureaucracy merely reinforces a perception of the

latter's identity with society, in which those within its boundaries see their own desires as representing those in the wider society. Seen in terms of a confusion between mechanism and purpose, it then becomes more clear how the purpose of bureaucracy, which should be determined by factors external to it, in actuality becomes determined within its bounds.

FINAL COMMENTS

Consideration of the MBL process can help elucidate the reasons bureaucratic institutions develop means for preventing outside influence on their decision-making capabilities. One explanation is that by forcing bureaucrats to concentrate so much of their time and efforts on internal personnel relations, they tend to lose sight of their actual functions in terms of the wider society. Another, however, is related more directly to the MBL process itself. Here, again, it is important to distinguish between mechanism and purpose. It is apparent that while the purpose of MBL is to permit greater participation in decision making (denial of status differences), the means for reaching this requires clarification of the realities of hierarchical authority (assertion of status differences). Thus, as an elaboration of internal hierarchy becomes necessary in order to reach a degree of equality, the process entails a need for stricter boundary maintenance in order to control those forces that are to become relevant to the decision-making situation. The effect may be to engender further means to exclude outside factors from interfering with internal decision-making procedures.

Finally, our analysis of the MBL suggests another function of bureaucracy, the significance of which increases as traditional religion declines in force as a means of providing social order. Often lacking the power of myth to structure a sense of general social order, rational society (and here I suggest Sweden merely as a penultimate example) must nonetheless cope with fundamental contradictions that gnaw at its sense of purpose. Those revealed by MBL—between demands for democracy and authority, between aims of equality and the need for hierarchic order—are perhaps the most basic dilemmas inherent in the Swedish welfare state. Exemplifying a means for dealing with such dilemmas, the MBL process within the bureaucracy symbolically combines two elements: an assertion of equality in spite of an existing hierarchy and an identification (i.e., merging) of bureaucracy with the wider society. Thus, from a ritual standpoint MBL as a facet of bureaucracy represents the latter's role in coping with the basic ideational contradictions of modern Sweden, providing a foundation for belief in the efficacy of a rational ordering system on which the functioning of that society is to be based.

NOTES

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¹ At the time the MBL was introduced, I was working at Stockholm University and recall the vast numbers of meetings conducted in order to explain its relevance to decision making at the university and the resulting confusion regarding changes in procedures.

² The word *konsulent* is best translated into English as advisor or consultant. As the use of these terms may tend to confuse their actual functions, I have decided to refer to these workers by their Swedish title.

³ This description is taken from a memorandum written by the board's steering committee to elucidate the konsulents' job activities.

⁴ The two unions were the Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (SACO) and the Central Organization of Salaried Employees (TCO). The vast majority of section employees were members of the latter.

⁵ A constant complaint leveled against bureaucracy is that much of its power vis-a-vis the citizenry rests in its secretiveness. This also holds true within any single agency where power relations are maintained through control over allocation of bureaucracy's fundamental internal resource—information. In attempting to increase access to information, MBL may be seen as fundamentally challenging the base on which hierarchical power differentiation and bureaucratic decision making rest.

⁶ There was also a move afoot to require the board to call a temporary halt to hiring externally, as the number of individuals within the board needing new jobs was rather large; however, there was no agreement to that effect between the board and the unions.

⁷ In a discussion of rank-and-file attitudes regarding workers' ability to influence union decisions, see interviews with Swedish metalworkers in Korpi (1978).

⁸ To an extent this is also true of private organizations, in which middle-line and personnel managers may find themselves in very similar ambiguous roles with conflicting claims of loyalty.

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