

Emmanuel Lazega, *Bureaucracy, Collegiality and Social Change. Redefining Organizations with Multilevel Relational Infrastructures* (Cheltenham: E. Elgar, 2020)

Bureaucracy, Collegiality and Social Change. Redefining Organizations with Multilevel Relational Infrastructures is a topical research providing a new theoretical perspective on the socio-political aspects of organizations. Methodologically, the book presents a novelty as it is conceived starting from two structuring logics in the analysis of the contemporary organizations, namely, bureaucracy and collegiality.

A very important part in capturing the a main aspects of reform, change and transitions in relation to the agency and functioning of the contemporary organizations is redefining them and identifying the best approach to their present-day realities: their multilevel structure and their cyclical network dynamics.

The book demonstrates a profound understanding of the changes taking place as well in the body of knowledge constituted around organizations, taking into account a complex context given by the newer phenomena shaping both the socio-political realities and our perception regarding organizational characteristics and transformations. In this respect, besides the dynamics implied by the digitalization of society, researcher Emmanuel Lazega, the author of the book, approaches organizations as multilevel networks influenced by the particularities of the relation between markets and societies, the impact of new institutions in political economy, the self-segregation of the elites, or the higher competition in matters of specialized theorization and science in relation to societies, markets and government. As the author notes: „Any book on the sociology of organizations must rely on the theory of bureaucracy, its characteristics and its twentieth century critique. This theory starts with Max Weber and Taylorian industrial bureaucracy, focusing on the main features of this ideal type: routine work, hierarchy, impersonal interactions between members and many others discussed by this plethoric literature, including the fact that bureaucratic routinization of production began with deskilling craftspeople and social Darwinist ideology.” (p. 7)

The roots of this investigation are represented by the emphasis of the crucial connection between the development of bureaucracy, the rise of the modern state and the constitution of modern corporations, as well as the relations with the context of the promotion of mass production and consumption and the critique of the Weberian and Taylorian views of bureaucracy. Mainly, the criticism of workers as automatons or “atomized robots”, or that employees work better in groups (which may happen, but not necessarily), the vision of organizations as static; the idea that the leaders and managers are rational. Instead, power, participation and coalition building are fluid, or in motion, or in course of development.

Social capital may or may be not identic with the relationships capital. Reciprocity and solidarity are experienced as varied “goods” and they may be distributed in various ways. In neo-structural sociology the matters resulting from individual confrontation of collective

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actions, as well as social interests, social claims and social discipline, at individual and at collective levels, are also important. In this respect, workplace relationships are “mobilized processes of generalized exchange; at the boundaries that the group has established for itself, based, for example, on exclusion(s) - among other manner of relating with others, our observation - and at the norms that its members are called upon to define and apply”. (p. 23)

Along with social networks and new forms of virtual, organized collective agency, bureaucracy attains therefore new sophistication levels, and they can be parameterized and managed digitally, while they are not depersonalized, organizing the very perception of work relations in a more nuanced and organized manner (p. 35, 96, 121). The organization depends on the accurate image and management of an organizational scheme of partners, contractors, subcontractors, clients, and employees, with specific interests and needs that can be always better described and better understood. New theories of stratification and “dynamic configuring fields” are involved in the explanation of organizational structuring and functioning, leading the author toward the metaphor of the multilevel spinning top for the multilevel, superimposed forms of collective agency, combining upper and lower organizational levels in order to accomplish a kind of synchronization correction for the relative oligarchical character driven by closed and collegial elites.

“This multispin uses circular movements and trajectories of members - for example, mobilities in loops and revolving doors from public responsibilities to private jobs and back to public positions - to create an informal pecking order (metaphorically: the shaft of the rotating spinning top) that enables the most central among these institutional entrepreneurs to obtain formal foothold positions. They can then act as vertical linchpins and brokers between conflicting sides with different political definitions of the institution. The main idea of this mechanism is that when such oligarchic and dynamic positions of institutional entrepreneurs moving up and down (top-down collegiality) are stabilized by a supportive inter-organizational network (hence the crucial dynamics of multilevel dimension of the process), these entrepreneurs are able to maintain their centrality and interactions long enough to surf on - if not to avoid altogether - the unpredictable and conflictual politics of an electoral process. This mechanism thus helps them succeed in their institutionalization efforts in spite of being a small collegial oligarchy (...)” (p. 97) capitalizing upon collective, interpersonal and inter-organizational types of agency.

An important consequential aspect is the expansion of the entrepreneurial and organizational network with beneficial implications on performance and innovation levels. Another aspect is the organizational culture and the importance of “weak culture”, defined as “banal, non-instrumental, non-demanding, non-exclusive” (p. 142), crucial in relating

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otherwise scattered individuals and social groups in a wider community, more susceptible to entertain an open attitude, shaping the attitudes about values in a more sophisticated and democratic way.

A fascinating discussion concerns the correlation among bounded solidarity, social niches and status competition, bringing up interest for “oppositional solidarities” and “top-down collegiality” within the relational infrastructures activated by various strategies. Often, a successful business means also maintaining a good reputation, that is, social status, within the interplay between social control and conflict resolution. In France, “consular” commercial courts have exactly this role. (p. 257) Individual judicial entrepreneurs are sponsored to ensure and to exert social control. The study of the multilevel dimension of markets emphasized a related effect, namely, “the strong link between the ways in which cooperation among competitors works as a ‘forth factor’ of production and the creation/reproduction of social inequalities in contemporary capitalist societies”. (p.177) Neo-structural economic sociology opens the perspective of markets behaving like organizational “tools with a life of their own” perpetuating and increasing inequality, mainly by mechanisms of cooperation among similar level competitors and against smaller, lower lever organizations, reinforcing the power of stronger companies, building up opportunities and resources and desolidarizing smaller players.

Organizations and their bureaucracies become more and more like collegial bogies, with bottom-up collegial bureaucracy and specific understanding of collective actions, freedoms, innovation, learning and responsibility; therefore aiming to be more and more closer to the template of swarms, both vertically and horizontally organized, self-organized, highly adaptable and efficient in their collective action. These models are now brought closer by digitalization, big data and social network data. The military image of the swarm is ready to be impressed into organizational and bureaucratic life. The danger brought by the indisputable benefices found in developing artificial intelligence algorithms that will further bureaucratize agency via the reification of multilevel relational infrastructures that minimize change and contestation, while weakening the regulation of inequality, autonomy and autonomous innovation in exchange for a predictable, more profitable and truly effective collective action. The model might be undertaken to reshape public space, political regimes and entire societies. The Weberian image of the “polar night of icy darkness” seems highly appropriate.

Bureaucracy, Collegiality and Social Change. Redefining Organizations with Multilevel Relational Infrastructures is therefore a remarkable synthesis of research associated to the latest achievements of the anthropological and sociological social networks and relational data knowledge. However, first and foremost the book is a lucid vision of the sensitivity of

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relational data, of the necessity to regulate private exclusive access to data, social engineering and defend a public and democratic national state and international power to guarantee and enforce the principles of open science and safeguard the autonomy of social sciences and their right to investigate, to critique and to tell the truth to power from unsubordinated, autonomous positions. These crucial ideas, which are also well-founded warnings, are convincingly based on a serious and impressive social networks and relational data knowledge.

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