

BUREAUCRACIES and ARISTOCRATS

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Origins The emergence of some recognizable bureaucracy was a crucial facet of the establishment of formal states. The same development hinged, in almost all cases, on the development of writing, essential for bureaucratic communication and record-keeping (only the Incas, among major states, lacked writing, keeping records in areas like taxation by a system of knotted ropes). But early bureaucracies were extremely limited: few people were literate, tax revenues were very modest. Thus court systems, as in Mesopotamia, had judges, but no police officers or other officials who might help apprehend criminals or investigate the facts of a crime. Early legal codes, as a result, emphasized very harsh and visible punishments, to help deter crime in absence of other enforcement; and enacted strong penalties for false testimony. Many government systems long relied heavily on the landed aristocracy to provide the bulk of the bureaucracy or to undertake bureaucratic functions directly – most obviously, in providing top military leadership. Aristocrats had sufficient leisure to gain some education and the means to support their official activities.

Chinese Innovation Classical China developed the most formal bureaucracy known to that point, particularly by the time of the Han dynasty. Even so, bureaucrats constituted only .2% of the population – again, an indication of the constraints that applied to this kind of service. Confucian culture helped instill in Chinese bureaucrats a sense of the importance of keeping order but also of the obligation to treat people – commoners – fairly, and this culture, however imperfectly realized, helped sustain the system. The Han dynasty also innovated in introducing some formal training for bureaucrats, revolving around exposure to literary classics and Confucian philosophy (this was not technical training in the modern sense). While most students came from the landed gentry – the link between aristocracy and bureaucracy was strong, a few talented peasants' sons might be recognized locally and provided with support for schooling. Tests, finally, confirmed access to bureaucratic posts. Again, most test-takers were from wealthy families, and there also seems to have been a great deal of cheating; but this was the first effort to link bureaucratic access to some objective merit system. The system would be extended and reformed at various points from the postclassical period onward.

Other Patterns Some Greek democracies chose key officials by lot, on the assumption that any citizen should have the capacity to administer competently. This was the case for a time in Athens, though the informal role of aristocrats like Pericles modified the system in practice. The Roman Empire increasingly associated bureaucracy with aristocratic titles, and this system continued to prevail during the Byzantine Empire. Aristocratic titles might be obtained by newcomers, for example successful business people, so the system was not entirely closed. But the Byzantine Empire became known for its elaborate and complex bureaucratic rules, and its proliferation of titles. The Arab Caliphates often struggled to find reliable bureaucrats. They, like governments in China and Byzantium, often relied in part on eunuchs, castrated males whose service presumably focused on safely guarding wives and mistresses of the ruler but who often gained wider power. The Caliphates also came to rely heavily on non-Arabs, who owed their position to the ruler and might also be assumed to be more reliable and loyal: this included use of Jews, Turks, Christians. Most bureaucrats gained their position after a period of apprenticeship to an established official. As in China and the Byzantine Empire, specializations increased, with bureaucrats emphasizing military, judicial, or taxation/disbursement functions. For all bureaucracies in the Agricultural Age, contacts between central government and outlying provinces was a clear challenge. Taxation functions, for example, were often farmed out to entrepreneurs who would keep a percentage of the take.

The Challenge of Decentralization Governments in some of the weaker political communities of the postclassical period struggled to assemble any formal bureaucracy at all, partly again because of lack of revenue. Feudal regimes in Western Europe and Japan essentially turned over many functions to the aristocracy, granting them land and privilege in return. Aristocrats provided military leadership, and also ran many local courts. The system had several obvious flaws: it did not assure competence; it was largely closed to other groups except insofar as they could gain access to the aristocracy; and it did not guarantee loyalty to the political leader, since the aristocrats had or soon gained their own independent economic base and military force. As monarchs struggled to gain greater power – from the late postclassical period onward, in Western Europe; under the Tokugawa shogunate in Japan, they began to supplement the aristocracy with people they recruited from the business class. These people might have particular expertise, for example in the financial area. They would also be more loyal to the leadership,

since they lacked independent status. In some cases however they might also simply buy their office: this was a key pattern in the public works unit of the British government in the 18th century. This mixture was characteristic of Western governments into the 19th century, and of Japanese governments until the Meiji era. Russia, though not a feudal society, had its own version of the conundrum. As its territory expanded from the 15th century onward, the regime had difficulty supporting and identifying an independent bureaucracy. Again, landed aristocrats were the answer: they provided the bulk of the bureaucracy directly, and they administered local courts and other government apparatus directly. Only a small non-aristocratic group gradually emerged alongside this reliance. Peter the Great, from the later 17th century, worked to improve aristocratic training, requiring some education, while also increasing reliance on a loyal, non-noble segment, but neither he nor subsequent tsars fundamentally changed the system.

The Long 19th Century The Atlantic revolutions challenged the existence of the aristocratic class, with partial success. French revolutionaries trumpeted the principle of careers open to talent, not privilege of birth (or purchase). The expansion of state functions required a larger, and probably also more predictably competent, bureaucratic apparatus. Lots of new functionaries ultimately had to be recruited, including teachers and public health inspectors. And finally, governments themselves began to expand training schools – for army officers, for teachers, for health officials. The result, particularly in the West during the 19th century, was a progressive movement away from relying on recruitment based on privilege of birth, toward recruitment based in part on least on apparent demonstration of merit. Many Western reformers were actively aware of the Chinese tradition, and sought to adapt key elements. In the British case, the demands of administering India as a colony also promoted key measures to improve training and recruitment. The result, in many societies particularly at first in the West, was a new kind of civil service operation, with people recruited in principle from any social group but appropriately trained and examined. Systems of this sort, spreading from the mid-19th century, prevailed also in the United States, Canada and Australia/New Zealand, and came to be increasingly adopted in Latin America as well. The same principles governed the recruitment of an Indian civil service group, by the British colonial administration.

Contemporary Patterns Revolutions and national independence movements had several implications for bureaucracies. Revolutions, most obviously, extended the process of severing links between bureaucracy and aristocracy, a crucial development both in Russia and China. Opportunities for new recruitment blossomed. But in many new or revolutionary states, identifying adequate numbers of competent officials could be a challenge. Tensions between the need for new bureaucracies and the lack of training described many new governments in the 20th century, for example in many parts of Africa including South Africa after the end of apartheid. While the issue of aristocracy was largely ended, challenges of favoritism and corruption may actually have increased. A given tribe might prefer recruitment from its ranks rather than tests of merit. A dominant political group might display similar favoritism, also restricting access to universities to those who demonstrated party loyalty; this was an issue in parts of the Middle East and east-central Europe. Virtually every region faced some challenge of access. Middle-class, professional families – including the families of bureaucrats themselves – carefully fostered their children's education and as a result gained disproportionate entry into the bureaucracies: these offspring had the educational credentials and the best test-taking skills, quite apart from any formal favoritism. The results often raised barriers (at least for the upper bureaucratic ranks) for women and racial or social minorities. Many governments, at least briefly, tried to promote some kind of affirmative action, to give some compensatory weight to minority status; in India, this included efforts to recruit people from the former lower castes. Most bureaucracies, by the 21st century, professed to seek competence and merit, but there were many complications.

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Suggested Reading:

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Global Dimensions of Public Administration and Governance: A Comparative Voyage. By Jos Raadschelders and Eran Vigoda-Gadot (Jossey-Bass, 2015).

Discussion

1. Why were aristocracies so important in government bureaucracies during the Agricultural Age?
2. What role did early Chinese bureaucracies have in production and control of knowledge? What other roles did the bureaucracy assume in early dynasties?
3. To what extent did Chinese bureaucratic innovations influence practices elsewhere, at some key points in world history?
4. What made Japanese aristocrats different from other social groups? What function did they serve in the government?
5. What were the special features of bureaucratic roles and organization in Russia before 1863? What tensions were there over local control in imperial Russia? What was the relationship between aristocrats, bureaucrats, and the military?
6. How did French revolutionary ideas of equality alter the notion of the aristocracy and bureaucracy?
7. What are some of the key contemporary variables in bureaucratic structure in the major world regions? How do civil violence or racial discrimination play a role?
8. What are the main changes in bureaucratic structure and role in contemporary world history, compared to patterns during the Agricultural Age?