Rules don’t apply: Kafka’s insights on bureaucracy

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Abstract
Weber’s ideal typical model of bureaucracy constitutes the starting point for most scholarship on organizations. Much organizational behaviour, however occurs outside this formalized model. It is thus somewhat surprising that behaviours outside the formal-rational model are, more often than not, treated as aberrations. In contrast, the emerging critical literature on ‘inhabited institutions’ has identified such gaps in our theoretical understanding as foundational, warranting a more agentic conception of organizational life—a conception more fully acknowledging of and sensitive to the dynamics of power in organizational life. In this regard, we highlight four prevalent (though seldom theoretically incorporated) features of contemporary bureaucracies—divergent goals, patrimonialism, unwritten rules and chaos. These features, which we contend are no less critical to organizational functioning than those identified by Weber, constitute an organizational logic more compatible with a Kafkan vision of bureaucracy than with a Weberian one. Theorizing such attributes allows us to explore elements of bureaucratic life that the formal-rational model of bureaucracy renders largely invisible and is conceptually and empirically ill equipped to incorporate. An illustrative analysis, drawing on narrative data drawn from the population of organizational ethnographies (n = 162) (1) demonstrates the prominence of such dynamics in organizational life; and (2) highlights their implications for rule breaking as a relatively common yet under-theorized occurrence. A core implication of our analysis and critique is that the social sciences need a fundamentally revised theory of bureaucracy capable of understanding bureaucracy’s power laden and often dystrophic features.

Keywords
bureaucracy, chaos, Kafka, rule breaking, Weber

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Bureaucracy has become the hegemonic organizational form in the 21st century. Prevailing theories of bureaucracy, however, rely heavily on the ideal typical model provided by Max Weber—a model that is now over a hundred years old and that largely neglects elements of personal, group and organizational power and misbehaviour that are increasingly recognized as prevalent in much scholarly work on bureaucracy (Baehr, 2001; Donkin, 2001; Vardi and Weitz, 2004). Important examples include some of the largest bureaucracies in the world—for instance, the world’s core financial institutions, which seek short-term profits through speculative investments, and the American health care industry, which ensures profits through excluding the sickest patients. Such organizational behaviour—much of which occurs outside of formal rules—presents an important challenge for organizational theory and, even more importantly, holds important consequences for organizational and societal functioning.

The emerging critical literature on ‘inhabited institutions’ has advanced the project of theoretically incorporating informal behaviour in organizational theory by focusing on power and human agency in applying organizational logics (Binder, 2007; Dobbin, 2009; Hallett and Ventresca, 2006). For example, over complexity, contradictory rules and subsequent rule breaking magnify the potential for large scale disasters and are now viewed as endemic in contemporary bureaucracy (Perrow, 1984; Vaughn, 1999). Yet, organizational theories have often treated such behaviour as deviant or abnormal. Weber’s model, in fact, assumes that bureaucratic behaviour largely follows agreed upon formal rules. His critique of bureaucracy focuses on the dysfunctions created by rigid adherence to formal rules above the pursuit of substantive goals. Unfortunately, the supposed rigid adherence to rules does not capture the key contemporary failings of bureaucracy (i.e. bending rules past the breaking point). Indeed, the most profound failings of bureaucracy more often involve treating rules as façades to cover actual operations—an insight developed by the literatures on inhabited institutions and more generally by the current generation of neo-institutional scholars and students of organizational misbehaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999; Jennings et al., 2005; Selznick, 1999; Vardi and Weitz, 2004).

The study of the dark side of organizations, however, remains significantly fragmented with few overlapping concepts to provide links between its many constituent areas (see Raufflet and Mills, 2009 for an overview). In this article, we offer a synthesis of this literature toward a critique of the actual functioning of bureaucracy that theoretically incorporates and integrates widespread organizational behaviours occurring outside those allowed by formal rules. The alternative, more critical theory of organizational functioning we propose highlights four bureaucratic attributes not included in Weber’s classic treatment but that are widely recognized as being equally as ubiquitous as Weber’s ideal typical characteristics: divergent goals, patrimonialism, unwritten rules and chaos. Explicit theoretical incorporation of these characteristics provides a much more Kafkaesque logic of bureaucracy than that originally posed by Weber, and one wherein confusion, deceit, conflict and personal power are understood as foundational in day-to-day organizational operations (see Warner, 2007).

The four attributes denoted above, and that lie at the crux of our theoretical formulation, are derived from longstanding ethnographic based insights. Divergent goals in organizations, for instance, are a mainstay in conflict oriented studies of work life (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005; Mills et al., 2005; Thomas and Davies, 2005). Patrimonialism—the velvet glove of power and manipulation within organizations—has spurred significant bodies of research exploring social closure and exclusion in organizations and has generated a sustained critique of the limits of participatory workplace arrangements (Edwards et al., 1998; Jackman, 2003; Knights and McCabe, 2000). The study of unwritten rules in organizations encompasses large bodies of scholarship from informal workplace relations (Roy, 1954) to organizational decoupling (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).
Finally, chaos reflects shifting, unstable and inconsistent procedures and goals—the antithesis of bureaucratic rationality according to Weber (see Burrell, 1997). Chaos, with its unpredictability and chronic ambiguity, is perhaps the most defining feature of Kafka’s vision of bureaucracy (Warner, 2007).

Scholars have long recognized the pervasiveness of these four features; yet studies of these more dysfunctional bureaucratic features remain largely unintegrated and disconnected from mainstream theorizing and scholarship on organizations. The argument we develop in this article is that these are, in fact, normal and regularly recurring aspects of bureaucracy that necessitate a reorientation of mainstream theoretical frames rather than being treated as anomalies. We provide evidence of the value added by these concepts by documenting their prevalence and analyzing their implications for organizational rule breaking. Rule breaking is defined as the deliberate violation of formal rules by members of the organization. Reflecting work by neoinstitutionalists and organizational ethnographers (Blau, 1955; Knights and McCabe, 2000; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), we contend that rule breaking is normal and even inevitable in bureaucracies, and that such routine rule breaking is theoretically explainable using appropriate concepts beyond those offered by Weber’s formal-rational model. By offering theoretical and empirical leverage on the question of routine rule breaking, we contribute to what is an increasingly coherent and far reaching critique of formal-rational model of bureaucracy by helping make visible that which has become obvious—that many bureaucracies are habitually lawless actors in society (see Courpasson 2006).

**Weber on bureaucracy**

The central themes of Weber’s model of bureaucracy are rationality and formality. Although a full review of Weber’s model is not possible here, it will be worthwhile to at least briefly identify the key facets of bureaucracy that underwrite this image. These facets include: 1) stable and exhaustive written rules, 2) fixed jurisdictional areas, 3) hierarchy with clear lines of subordination and supervision and 4) thorough training leading to specialized expertise (Weber, 1946). In Weber’s own words the themes of rationality and impersonality are paramount:

> The objective discharge of business primarily means a discharge of business according to calculable rules and ‘without regard for persons’. … The more the bureaucracy is ‘dehumanized’, the more completely it succeeds in eliminating from official business love, hatred, and all purely personal, irrational, and emotional elements which escape calculations. This is the specific nature of bureaucracy and is appraised as its special virtue. (Weber, 1946: 214)

This conception has been the framework through which scholars have examined all types of formalized organizations, from for-profit firms to social movement organizations. Despite its widespread use, however, the Weberian approach has largely overlooked much of what actually goes on within the offices of bureaucracy, perhaps especially in its most pervasive modern incarnation—the large private sector corporation.

Weber’s account of bureaucracy is overly formal, top down and accepts bureaucracy too much in its own terms. This should not necessarily come as a surprise. Weber was a high level functionary in the Prussian state, a position from which formal rules may easily have been misperceived as operational realities (as highlighted in Meyer and Rowan’s, 1979, discussion of myth and ceremony). This view, we contend, emerged in significant part from the privileged position he occupied...
for much of his life (see Wright, 2002). By examining bureaucracy from the pinnacles of power, his attention was drawn towards the formalized exterior of bureaucracy presented for public consumption. Although Weber recognized occasional aberrations, the rationalization of authority was sufficient in his view to compel individuals to follow rules and work on behalf of the formal goals of the organizations.

The individual bureaucrat cannot squirm out of the apparatus into which he has been harnessed. ... [T]he professional bureaucrat is chained to his activity in his entire economic and ideological existence. In the great majority of cases he is only a small cog in a ceaselessly moving mechanism which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march. ... The individual bureaucrat is, above all, forged to the common interest of all the functionaries in the perpetuation of the apparatus and the persistence of its rationally ordered domination. (Weber, 1946: 216)

In Weber’s vision and for the German elites of his time, the ‘ceaselessly moving mechanism’ of bureaucracy was indeed well suited to advancing the collective interests of those who set it in motion.

The legacy of Weber’s model of bureaucracy has been further cleansed by the popular translation of his work by Talcott Parsons (1937). In defining bureaucratic dimensions of authority, Parsons translated the German word *herrschaft* as ‘authority’—authority circumscribed by normative consensus and with collective functioning as its core aim. Subsequent translators suggest that a more accurate translation, and indeed a translation closer to Weber’s intent, is ‘domination’ (Bendix, 1978; du Gay, 2009). Thus, much of Weber’s critical interpretation of bureaucracy as a form of domination has been lost to the social sciences, which have moved forward with a vision of bureaucracy significantly less critical than even the one Weber intended (Clegg, 2005; Clegg and Lounsbury, 2009; Cummings and Bridgman, 2011: 84; Shenhav, 2006).

**Critiques of Weber’s formal-rational bureaucratic model**

Those who have examined organizations from the bottom up have a much different, darker view of what actually goes on inside the ‘black box’ of organizational life (Perrow, 1986; Raufflet and Mills, 2009). Perhaps the most widely recognized of these critics is the literary author Franz Kafka, a contemporary of Weber, who was interested in all that lies underneath the formal bureaucratic structure: contradictory goals, chaos, deceit and the ability of actors to hoard power and exploit others for personal gain. The genius of Kafka’s critique of bureaucracy lies not in identifying that such elements exist in formal organizations (although he was among the first to write about them extensively), but rather in the implicit argument that such features are a normal and foundational part of organizational functioning.

Kafka was also a bureaucrat, but at a much lower rank than Weber. Kafka was a career secretary at the Workers’ Accident Insurance Institute of Bohemia—a position from which the abusive, chaotic, inconsistent and personalized application of rules was all too obvious (Warner, 2007). Kafka was keenly aware of the misery both of his clients and of lower tier officials and of their manipulation by bureaucrats and employers. Rule breaking by individuals at all levels within the organization is thus both pervasive and ‘normal’ in Kafka’s vision of bureaucracy, a vision predicated upon the recognition that bureaucracies often serve the interests of the most powerful at the expense of the powerless.
If organizational goals are contested rather than agreed upon and formalized rules serve the interests of elites at the expense of subordinates, then power is no longer legitimate, conflict is likely to arise, and unequal treatment becomes a defining characteristic of bureaucracy (Kalev and Dobbin, 2006; Perrow, 1984). Subordinates must look to pathways outside formal rules to resist exploitation, control the work process and protect their interests (Thomas et al., 2004). Organizational leaders, for their part, may also find it advantageous to go outside the formal structure to pursue their goals thus avoiding external constrains and accountability (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Rule breaking and other behaviours not formally prescribed thus become predictable if not inevitable at all levels.

Weber’s formal-rational model of bureaucracy, and the Parsonian interpretation of it, has largely dominated social sciences for over a hundred years. Traditional critiques of bureaucracy largely accept Weber’s underlying characterization and then highlight dysfunctions of formal-rational systems. We touch on such critiques briefly but then move quickly to the limited body of work that actually disputes Weber’s characterization of bureaucracy as a formal-rational system. Like these latter studies, it is our contention that less-formalized, nasty and brutish elements of bureaucracy that are made invisible by formal-rational legitimizing structures (formal rules, policies, procedures, etc.) are hardly aberrations, but rather core features of modern bureaucratic operations. Our goal in what follows is to develop a revised theoretical model that, rather than supplanting Weber’s formal rational conception, builds and extends upon it in a way that captures more directly the sometimes dark and often inconsistent realities of modern organizational life.

The loyal opposition. Most people dislike bureaucracy and scholars are increasingly sensitive to such discontent. Bureaucracies are accused of being overly formal in their pursuit of goals—substituting formal rationality (following a particular plan) for substantive rationality (flexible behaviour seeking a broad goal). Bureaucratic behaviour is easily displaced from goals to means and instrumental values can become terminal values (Blau, 1955). The result can be bureaucratic inefficiency in the attainment of stated goals (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

Creativity is an early fatality under such systems. Bureaucracies can also be criticized for being impersonal and ignoring individual circumstances as people are hammered into fixed templates. Bureaucrats even force themselves into fixed scripts and are said to acquire ‘bureaucratic personalities’ reflecting extreme rigidity (Merton, 1940) and the possession of expertise that becomes ‘trained incapacity’ to see options that may actually be more fruitful (McGoey, 2007). Bureaucratic settings have been found to be antithetical to more entrepreneurial approaches (Sørensen, 2007) and often rely on mimicry, rather than creativity (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Such critiques are entirely valid, though they tend not to dispute Weber’s underlying characterization of bureaucracy as a formal-rational system nor question the validity of such a characterization (indeed such critiques are often predicated on the assumption that rules are slavishly followed), and are thus limited in the depth of their critique.

An emerging critical consensus. In Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy Alvin Gouldner (1954) describes a gypsum mine and factory in which safety rules are routinely ignored—because they are inconvenient. Management and employees have informally agreed to this winking relationship. In addition, supervisors indulge workers in other domains (e.g. attendance policies, taking supplies home, etc.) in exchange for employee cooperation in areas they deem more essential, such as production quotas. Gouldner refers to this pattern of multiple parties agreeing to circumvent rules as ‘mock bureaucracy’.
Winking at the rules is not part of Weber’s formal-rational model of how organizations operate. Nor is it covered in critiques of the dysfunctions of excessive rationality and the bureaucratic personality. Gouldner’s account thus offers a significant alternative to the Weberian formal-rational model by suggesting three types of bureaucracy—punishment centered (Weberian), mock and representative. In representative bureaucracy, workers and managers (stakeholders in contemporary terms) would be involved in ongoing dialogue about the directions and goals of the enterprise. This is a significant departure from Weber’s vision of fixed formal goals arriving from external sources (e.g. political processes or market forces). Instead, Gouldner suggests that bureaucracies are inhabited by real actors involved in ongoing negotiations that define goals and the manner in which such goals are to be pursued (see also Hallett and Ventresca, 2006; McGoeey, 2007).

Gouldner’s concepts of mock bureaucracy and the overt violation of rules have contributed to social science analyses of organizational disasters such as the Three Mile Island nuclear leak (Stephens, 1980), the Challenger space shuttle crash (Vaughan, 1996) and the Bhopal pesticide leak (Bowman and Kunreuther, 1988). By combining Gouldner’s analysis of overt rule breaking with insights about chaos resulting from unsustainable complexity in organizational systems, this research field has illuminated how formal organizations routinely generate large scale disasters (Perrow, 1984). Moreover, Gouldner’s insights about mock bureaucracy have provided a theoretical foundation for the literature on organizational decoupling—a literature that identifies ways in which actors in subordinate positions often ignore mandates from above to preserve organizational functioning at their own level (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Reed, 1988).

Despite the utility of Gouldner’s conception of mock bureaucracy for studies of organizational disasters and institutional decoupling, insights from these literatures have yet to generate a sustained and integrated theoretical conception of day-to-day operations in bureaucracies—the venue for which Gouldner developed them. Research endeavours inspired by Gouldner remain largely isolated as distinct contributions rather than forming an integrated foundation for a fully developed theoretical critique of the formal-rational model of bureaucracy. Studies of decoupling, for example, generally treat this as a rational step taken by organizations in efforts to achieve their goals in complex environments. Treating informal behaviors such as rule breaking as normal features of bureaucratic life provides an opportunity for a more fundamental critique of Weber’s formal-rational model.

More recently, in a heavily cited article published in Administrative Science Quarterly, Adler and Borys (1996) have argued that the late 20th century witnessed the birth of a new form of bureaucracy based on heightened employee participation—‘enabling bureaucracy’. Enabling bureaucracy is based on the principles of flexibility and transparency and seeks to provide a framework for a more effective interfacing of employees with each other and with their work. Enabling bureaucracy is contrasted with coercive bureaucracy based on direct control of the minutia of work, task segmentation, and a myopic focus on the speed and dexterity of employees.

Adler and Borys’ (1996) central focus on enabling bureaucracy resonates well with a large body of literature on employee participation and ‘post-bureaucratic enterprises’ (see Edwards et al., 1998 for a review of this literature). It also rests on an accurate reading of contemporary corporate efforts to use employee input at the point of production to increase efficiency. Of course, critics of these developments point out that coercion is not eliminated in employee involvement systems but may actually be expanded through giving management functions to task groups, resulting in what Barker (1999) has labeled ‘concertive control’ (see also Courpasson and Clegg, 2006). There is also the possibility that external constraints on firms, such as the
profit motive, inhibit movement toward enabling bureaucracy. The result may be that enabling bureaucracy often reflects only symbolic changes from coercive bureaucracy (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005). While employees at the point of production may enjoy greater involvement in deciding the details of their tasks, enabling bureaucracy thus is unlikely to represent a fundamental change in the underlying goals or dynamics that guide corporate action or bureaucratic decision making (Vallas, 2006, 2007).

Despite these potential caveats, it is important to recognize ways in which Adler and Borys’ (1996) conception, like that of Gouldner, moves beyond Weber’s formal-rational model in order to understand bureaucracy in terms of a relationship between formal structure and underlying interests. Where underlying interests militate against formal rules, Adler and Borys argue, formal structure becomes coercive; where interests and rules reinforce one another, formal structure can become enabling. Thus, coercive and enabling bureaucracy have clear parallels in Gouldner’s concepts of punishment-centered and representative bureaucracy. In this paper, our task is to build on these conceptualizations—that recognize interests and power as the building blocks of bureaucratic rules—by specifying the core social and organizational dynamics underlying and interacting with formal-rational bureaucratic structures. Inspiration for such a vision can be found in the works of Franz Kafka.

**Kafkaesque bureaucracy**

Kafka’s key works on bureaucracy are generally considered to be *The Trial, The Castle* and *In the Penal Colony* (Warner 2007). A close reading of these works provides theoretical guideposts for understanding the unformalized, personal and often seemingly irrational aspects of organizations surrounding divergent goals, patrimonialism, unwritten rules and chaos. These four elements in no way encompass the entire universe of organizational behaviours outside formal structures. They do, however, match well with subsequent organizational scholarship describing key exceptions to formal-rational bureaucracy. Here we bring them together in a coherent critique to help understand routine rule breaking in formal organizations, which is pervasive but theoretically puzzling under Weber’s formal-rational model.

Organizational scholars, as we note in the discussions that follow, have been generally sensitive to each of characteristics individually and include them in their conceptual tool kits for understanding perceived ‘anomalies’ in bureaucratic functioning, but without developing them into an alternative model of bureaucracy. The genius of Kafka, we contend, is that his critique of bureaucracy is much more wide ranging and explicit and therefore able to link together into a coherent whole various features of bureaucracy viewed individually as deviant or irrational by scholars (see Kafka, 1937). The four elements of organizational life we describe represent a necessary addition to the formalized Weberian approach if we are to achieve a thorough and honest understanding of modern bureaucracy. These dimensions also align well with the call for introducing (or reintroducing) actors into inhabited bureaucracies (Hallett and Ventresca, 2006; Selznick, 1999; Stinchcombe, 1997). Perhaps the most essential element denoted by Kafka is that of the personal power and agency of actors in bureaucracy (something lost in the Weberian image of bureaucracy as an iron cage constraining individual action). It is this centrality of power and the abuse of power for personal gain, that we contend serves as the unifying theoretical foundation upon which these four informal elements of bureaucracy rest (see also Martin et al. forthcoming). We now turn to a consideration of these four undertheorized elements of bureaucracy.
Divergent goals. While a direct interpretation of the Weberian formal-rational model largely relegates conflict within formal organizations to personal avarice and individual failings, scholars have long recognized that virtually all organizations are comprised of groups who have competing interests. The most obvious example is for-profit firms, where managers seek to reduce labour costs while workers, either individually or collectively, resist (Edwards and Wajcman, 2005; Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991). Even in ostensibly democratic settings, such as social movement organizations, scholars, notably (Michels, 1915 [1959]) and his famous iron law of oligarchy, have long claimed that leaders seek to monopolize their control over the organization, replacing efforts for social change with the overriding goal of organizational maintenance. The importance of internal competition among organizational actors was a major pillar in the work of many “old” institutionalists (Selznick, 1949)—one that we believe has been too often lost as scholarship has shifted towards a field level analysis of organizations.

While the interests of various actors can—and often are—brought into partial or temporary alignment, the tension between various interests remains a defining characteristic of organizational life (Hodson et al., 2006; Reed, 1988Sims, 2005) even as organizational leaders seek to unite multiple groups for a common purpose. Indeed, Chester Barnard’s (1950) classic statement that organizational leadership lies chiefly in establishing a vision of common purpose rests on the observation that in many organizations such a vision is missing or problematic. In Kafka’s In the Penal Colony, the officer who has devoted himself to maintaining a cruel device for execution through torture explains that others appear to have the ear of the new Commandant and are intriguing against his prize device and its continued use. Such conflicts are as commonplace as paperwork in bureaucracies, even if the obscenity of Kafka’s example casts them in a particularly harsh light:

This procedure and method of execution, which you are now having the opportunity to admire, has at the moment no longer any open adherents in our colony. I am its sole advocate. … The adherents have skulked out of sight, there are still many of them but none of them will admit it. If you were to go into the teahouse today, on execution day, and listen to what is being said, you would perhaps hear only ambiguous remarks … An attack of some kind is impending on my function as judge; conferences are already being held in the Commandant’s office from which I am excluded. (Kafka, In the Penal Colony, 1971: 153)

Patrimonialism. In the formalized, rational bureaucracy described by Weber, individuals advance through the organization’s hierarchy solely on the basis of credentials and merit. Yet there is considerable evidence that particularistic, rather than universalistic, criteria play a critical role in the evaluation of subordinates (Heimer, 1992; Kanter, 1977). Such arrangements have a long history stretching back to antiquity and there is scant reason to suspect their disappearance under modern bureaucratic arrangements—the ostensible formality of evaluation criteria not withstanding (Ruef and Harness, 2009). Patrimonialism is, by definition, a tool of elites to ensure loyalty by subordinates, and thus we should not be surprised to find that it continues to be commonplace in modern organizations. Scholars have long recognized that informal networks are critical for a myriad of individual outcomes in organizations—from promotions to securing important privileges and perks (Roscigno, 2007). The management training literature routinely speaks of the importance of ‘mentorship’ (Kram, 1985). And there is compelling evidence that such ‘old boy networks’—regardless of their value as conduits for mentoring—are also used by privileged groups to exclude women and minorities from positions of power (Jackman, 2003; Thomas et al., 2004).

While personal networks may be especially important for those seeking advancement in the organization, as Durkheim (1933) recognized, such vertically arrayed solidarities also have a role in overcoming class tensions between levels within organizations (see also du Gay, 2000). Thus,
the formal goals of organizations, which cannot be met without the cooperation of multiple layers within the organization, necessarily create pressures for informal cross-level alliances. Kafka frequently highlights in his writings the importance of personal aspects of ‘formal’ communications:

Those telephone answers are of ‘real significance’, how could it be otherwise? How could the information supplied by a Castle official be meaningless? I said so already in relation to Klamm’s letter. All these statements have no official meaning; if you attach official meaning to them, you’re quite mistaken, though their private meaning as expressions of friendship or hostility is very great, usually greater than any official meaning could ever be. (Kafka, *The Castle* 1926: 72–73; emphasis added)

Unwritten rules. The formal rules in organizations are often quite disparate from the way things actually get done (Gouldner, 1954). Scholars have long been interested in the ‘negotiated order’ between workers and managers, whereby these two parties come to informal understandings regarding appropriate levels of effort, breaks, attendance and so on (Roy, 1954). Virtually all organizations are also monitored by external actors (either regulatory agencies or private watchdog groups) that can complicate the attainment of organizational goals. Neoinstitutionalists have introduced the concept of decoupling, the separation of the formal structure—which they describe as ‘ceremony and ritual’ designed to appease external audiences—from the actual task structure of the organization, which houses significant latitude for implementation of goals (Meyer and Rowan, 1977).

In situations where such unwritten rules of behaviour are common, we expect the breaking of formal rules to be pervasive. In the following passage, an official, whom K. has maneuvered to encounter outside regular hours, coyly explains how rules can sometimes be ignored:

Of course this is a very rare opportunity, that is to say, one that virtually never arises. It entails the party’s arriving unannounced in the middle of the night. It may surprise you that this opportunity, which appears to be a matter of course, should arise so rarely … And now, Surveyor, consider the possibility that a party does succeed somehow or other, despite the generally adequate obstacles I have already mentioned, in surprising in the middle of the night a secretary who does have some jurisdiction in that particular case … You think this can never happen. You’re right, in can never happen. But at night—who can vouch for everything?—it does happen. (Kafka, *The Castle*, 1926: 265-68)

Chaos. Bureaucratic organizations face complex and multilayered environmental fields comprised of a diverse array of actors—competitors, professional associations, regulatory bodies and employees—to name just a few (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Selznick, 1949). Not only are these groups able to wield significant influence, their agendas often contradict one another, leading to chronic states of contradiction and confusion (Burrell, 1997; Parker, 2005)—and in games of blame avoidance if covert agendas unravel (Hood, 2007).

Chaos, however, can also result from processes wholly arising internally from a single set of goals. Vaughan (1999) describes ‘the dark side of organizations’, where interactions between internal organizational processes can lead to undesired and unintended outcomes. In *Normal Accidents*, Charles Perrow (1984) argues that, in technologically complex social systems designed to handle myriad problems, small miscalculations can have enormous negative consequences. Driven by bounded rationality and efforts to routinize all challenges (Collins, 1992), organizations can compound these contradictions by creating multiple layers of contradictory rules that actually contribute to internal chaos (Clarke, 1999). Thus, in many situations, chaos—like other aspects of the dark side of organizational life—explicitly arises out of the formalized; the attempt to routinize every facet of organizational life can itself create chaos.
Chaos also arises out of the arbitrary use of bureaucracies by powerful actors who bend them to their own goals. For example, stressed production systems based on just-it-time delivery and zero slack have chaos as an inherent feature of production because of the absence of buffers to absorb chaos (Rinehart, Huxley and Robertson, 1997). Thus, chaos can and does arise out of excessive and unitary power by one actor, not just from competing agendas between actors. Beyond vertical tensions within organization, chaos may also arise horizontally, as different groups of actors seek to protect their own position in the organization. Recent scholarship on organizational closure (Roscigno et al., 2007) suggests that such organizational chaos also contributes to uncertainty regarding expectations for advancement.

We expect rule breaking to be pervasive in chaotic organizations because of the many uncertainties chaos generates. An example is provided by K. (Kafka’s persona in The Castle) who has been hired as a land surveyor but, when he arrives, finds there is no such work needed:

You were, as you say, taken on as a surveyor, but we don’t need a surveyor. There wouldn’t be the least bit of work for a person like that. The boundaries of our small holdings have been marked out, everything has been duly registered, the properties themselves rarely change hands, and whatever small boundary disputes arise, we settle ourselves, so why should we have any need for a surveyor? … In an administration as large as the Count’s, it can happen at some point that one department issues an order, another a second, neither department knows of the other. (Kafka, The Castle, 1926: 59–60)

While the literature on institutional decoupling suggests that apparent chaos and contradiction can sometimes allow creative solutions to emerge (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), it is our contention that chaos must also be considered in its more obvious role—as an impediment to smooth organizational functioning.

Theoretical summary. There is considerable evidence that the four unrationalized moments in organizational life we have outlined are endemic even in reputedly ‘rational’ bureaucracies and capture much of what critics have identified as cynical, mock, or dark side elements of life inside formal organizations (Gouldner, 1954; Vardi and Weitz, 2004). We present these not as deviations from the norm, as is commonly assumed, but rather as the norm. In addition, we contend that the contradictions created by the formal-rational aspects of organizational life necessarily create conditions of conflict, contention and chaos (Jay, 1973). These moments of organizational life are both reflections of and conduits for personal agency and power, particularly for the most powerful organizational actors. The ineffectiveness of routinized responses to the unexpected and mobilized groups with divergent interests are further important forces leading to the continual recreation of the informal within the formal-rational. We argue that incorporating divergent goals, patrimonialism, unwritten rules and chaos into Weber’s formal-rational model of bureaucracy provides a more holistic understanding of bureaucratic functioning, one that puts power and control at the fore of our thinking regarding organizational functioning. A summary of the intellectual roots of these four unrationalized facets of bureaucracy is presented in Table 1.

Much of the impetus behind recurring aspects of bureaucratic behaviour outside those formally prescribed can be directly traced to efforts by organizational leaders to suppress the internal contradictions that spring from competing goals within bureaucracies and from divergent pressures from without. In this sense the formal-rational world of rules implies and necessitates the creation of its opposite through contradiction and contestation (Jay, 1973; Mills and Murgatroyd, 1991).

Formalized organizational structures emphasize the goals and interests of the organization as it presents itself to the outside world; to explicitly acknowledge chaos, self-interest and personal
networks that contradict widely held values would be to undercut the legitimacy provided by the external appearance of a rational approach to achieving clearly defined goals. Leaders thus often turn to older, pre-rational tools, such as patrimonialism to compel adherence on the part of subordinates in the organization. Under this interpretation, rather than ‘sweeping away’ older forms of authority, bureaucratic rules often merely provide a veneer of legitimacy for older, less formalized exchanges (see Dobbin, 2009).

It is not our contention that the formal-rational elements of bureaucracy are unimportant, but rather that Weber’s model of bureaucracy is fundamentally incomplete because it fails to offer any way of understanding the continuation and recreation of the informal—except as an accidental (and fading) admixture of premodern and modern organizational types. Treating the matter this way assumes that the logic of formal rational organization is self-contained, complete and ultimately ascendant; our assertion is that it is none of these. Moreover, Weber’s model—often in the narrowest terms—has become fetishized by scholars and organizational actors alike, and narrowly frames how we are able to think about organizations. As a consequence, many of the informal elements discussed above have largely been conceptualized or even trivialized as deviations from the norm. However, organizational insights described below, drawn from the population of published English language workplace ethnographies, clearly illustrate that such features of the informal in organizational life are pervasive, routine, and as consequential for everyday organizational functioning as the formal. A valid and more critical theory of bureaucracy must take such elements into consideration.

**Encounters with the dystrophic in organizational life**

We see the contribution of our analysis as threefold: 1) to offer a systematic critique of the formal-rational model of bureaucracy, 2) to extend Weber’s conceptualization to include dystrophic elements and 3) to provide an analysis of narratives of systematic rule breaking in organizations that illustrates and underlines how central dystrophic elements of bureaucracy can be used to understand organizational behaviour. Our analysis focuses on narrative data because qualitative researchers have been at the forefront of establishing the importance of the informal within the formal-rational. Deductive and quantitative analyses—partly because of lack of guidance from a coherent theoretical model of the dystrophic—have focused more narrowly on formalized aspects of organization life (cf. Kalleberg et al., 1996).

Despite a clear recognition of dystrophic organizational elements by qualitative researchers, their typical focus on one, or at most a few organizations, has sometimes been interpreted as indirectly supporting the image that unrationalized aspects of bureaucracy are an anomaly confined to specific cases. Our analysis, in contrast, rests on the content coding of over 160 book-length organizational

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<tr>
<td>Divergent goals</td>
<td>Competing group interests, such as management versus the worker (Donkin, 2001; Edwards and Wajcman, 2005; Sims, 2005)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrimonialism</td>
<td>Old boy networks/social closure/particularism (Jackman, 2003; Kanter, 1977; Thomas et al., 2004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwritten rules</td>
<td>Informal work groups/decoupling (Knights and McCabe, 2000; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Roy, 1954)</td>
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ethnographies for instances of formal and informal behaviour in organizations. This large body of ethnographic work, and the organizational heterogeneity that it entails, provides clear evidence: 1) that dystrophic features of organizational life are not deviant but rather normal and widespread and 2) that they help explain one of the most puzzling behaviours in organizations—at least for scholars following Weber—chronic rule breaking. By incorporating these informal elements, we are able to take important steps towards a more systematic and complete theory of the bureaucracy.

Organizational ethnographies as data

To access the hidden domains of organizational rule breaking, chaos and patrimonialism, which for obvious reasons are often subterranean, we rely on the in-depth observations provided in organizational ethnographies. Importantly, these data also provide the necessary organizational variability to ascertain patterns of relationships between organizational characteristics and rule-breaking—variability not typically available within single case studies. Below we describe how the cases were identified, coded and culled for patterns. We then return to the original narratives in the search for meanings and mechanisms behind the observed patterns.

Selection and coding

Appropriate ethnographies were selected in a two-part procedure. First, the population of organizational ethnographies was identified via computer-assisted searches of archives and examination of the bibliographies of already located ethnographies. The search ended when no new titles were generated for review. We also utilized a team of 20 experts to review our lists and suggest new titles. Contemporary resources of interlibrary loan and internet-based used book sales allowed the consideration and inclusion of a wide range of books not limited to those still in print.

The result is a set of cases with basic coverage of organizational characteristics and managerial and employee behaviour. For the current article we focus on cases from the United States and the United Kingdom because of their common organizational and administrative heritage (n = 162)—about 80% of the total cases coded. Both industrial and service settings are well represented; occupational groups include manual labour and service work, as well as a range of white-collar occupations including clerical, managerial and professional work.

A team of four researchers developed the coding instrument for the ethnographies. First, we generated a list of variables and preliminary response categories representing core concepts in the organizational literature. Second, each of the four team members individually read and coded a common selected ethnography and then met to discuss consistencies and inconsistencies in their respective codings, the retention or removal of items and the refinement of variables, response categories and coding protocols. This process of reading, coding and refinement was repeated for eight representative ethnographies. The goal was to create an instrument that trained coders could complete for each of the ethnographies with maximum reliability.2

Once the coding instrument was finalized, the full set of ethnographies were read and coded by the same initial team of four researchers, participants in a year-long graduate research practicum, and additional graduate research assistants supported through a National Science Foundation grant. All coders were trained to use a common protocol. Coders worked individually, documenting their conclusions with page numbers, and then met together to review each case in detail and to resolve questions. Where coders found contradictory information for particular variables, they discussed relevant passages with the team, which determined as a group how to code the item.
Key concepts

One of the benefits of analysing narrative data is the ability to return to the original passages to illustrate the meanings of the concepts and the manner in which they are coded—a project to which we now turn.

Rule breaking. The central outcome for our analysis is organizational rule breaking. Although some rule breaking occurs in all contexts, organizations vary greatly in this regard. We coded rule breaking as either typical or atypical in organizations based on the accounts provided. Of the 162 cases analysed, 97 (60%) evidenced rule breaking as a defining feature of normal operations. The following episode from an ethnography of a hospital suggests a pattern of pervasive rule violation by senior surgeons, in this case evidenced by the head of surgery:

In Meadowbrook University Hospital residents were not legally permitted to operate without an attending surgeon present during the operation. Nevertheless, some surgeons at Meadowbrook University Hospital, most notably the chief, Dr. White, had his resident regularly carry out surgery for many ‘routine’ surgical procedures while they surreptitiously absented themselves from the operating room and worked in another part of the hospital. ‘Routine’ did not necessarily mean minor; routine referred to familiar procedures of which they do many. Many of the procedures the chief resident performed for Dr White were major surgery … The surgeons who engaged in this practice first greeted the awake patient in the operating room, signed the operative orders, and instructed the resident(s), anesthesiologist, and nurses. As soon as the patient was unconscious the surgeon typically left the operating room but remained in the hospital building and was available to be contracted by beeper and telephone. When the operation ended the resident contracted the surgeon who came back to the operating room area and signed the completed operative report that the resident had written. The Operative Report listed all the people present during the operation and explicitly stated that the surgeon, not the resident, performed the operation. (Katz, 1999: 100)

Bureaucratic characteristics. Organizations were recorded as evidencing each characteristic—divergent goals, unwritten rules, patrimonialism and chaos—if that the characteristic was a chronic feature of day-to-day functioning in the organization. Although examples in the discussion below refer to individual incidents, we did not consider organization to evidence a particular characteristic unless it was clearly the dominant pattern. Again, illustrations from the ethnographic accounts that underlie these data help clarify their meaning. For example, chaotic organizational procedures and equipment in poor repair are illustrated in an account of a restaurant with high end pretensions:

The knobs on the stove burners do not turn properly; the only way to light a burner is to toss a match at it … Larry tells me: ‘It’s terrible. We have the worst equipment. All of our equipment is twenty-five years old. That’s some of the worst stuff I’ve ever worked on’. … There was also friction because of problems with a lack of space in the kitchen and a confusion of organizational responsibility. … The cooks had to work in a very narrow area, with stoves close together. The cook who worked the window was in charge of the grill and would continually interfere with the cook on the stove and the one doing the preparation work. (Fine, 1996: 84, 248–249)

Predictably, such environments do not encourage rule following: ‘I get Bruce a dish of escargots from the freezer. One of the snails falls on the floor, and I ask Bruce: “Can we use that one?” Bruce assures me: “Sure. They won’t know”’ (Fine, 1996: 33). Other bureaucratic characteristics will be illustrated in the results section in conjunction with discussion of their observed relationships with rule breaking.
Kafka confirmed

A systematic analysis of the body of organizational ethnography suggests that the Kafkaesque elements of bureaucracy we have described are widespread across organizations. Patterns of organizational functioning in which the Kafkaesque characteristics are described by an organizational ethnographer as prevalent or defining range from 32% for divergent goals to 72% for paternalism. Fully 86% of organizations evidence a widespread pattern of at least one of these elements being characteristic of their operations, leaving a modest 14% of organizations operating according to what could reasonably be called a formal-rational model. This pattern will come as little surprise to those who have observed bureaucratic organizations directly. One benefit of considering this body of work as a whole is that it clearly disallows the conclusion that each instance is somehow an aberration.

A sense of the relationships between rule breaking and the more Kafkaesque aspects of bureaucracy is provided by the correlations presented in Table 2. The correlations between the Kafkaesque aspects of bureaucracy and rule breaking are all positive and statistically significant. More meaningful for our purposes, however, are the processes and mechanisms revealed by returning to the narrative accounts themselves. Our central point in this analysis will be to show in greater detail how a Kafkan critical theory of bureaucracy—emphasizing divergent goals, unwritten rules, patrimonialism and chaos—emerges from a systematic review of the narrative accounts embedded in organizational ethnographies and is capable of explaining systematic patterns of rule breaking, a phenomenon theoretically inaccessible through a formal-rational model of organizational functioning.3

The role of divergent goals in fostering rule breaking is illustrated in an ethnography of a bank undergoing downsizing because of failed hyper-entrepreneurialism engineered from the top. Top management’s response is to blame ‘bureaucratically rigid’ middle managers and to bring in consultants to retrain them:

> Trainers also used dismissive statements, such as ‘We may be getting off on a tangent’ … to defuse ‘hot points’ during the seminars. But this marginalizing tactic did not deter Helen from insisting that concepts such as ‘thought process’ and ‘individual judgment’ were vague and of little help … The difficulty of managing the politics of a speedup was clear to Helen. Her concern, she argued, was not with abstractions and theory, but with ‘fairness and consistency. The practicality [of managing up employees’ performance] is, you’d better know what you’re doing’. (Smith, 1990: 72)

Top management was unable to convert middle management to their view of the source of the current problems and the wisdom of their proposed solutions; the result was strategic rule breaking by middle management:

> The tension in the process led group systems managers to circumvent rankings by ‘playing games with the numbers’ … By playing with the ranking rules, managers shifted employees across evaluation periods and across project groups to achieve a more equitable distribution of raises and promotions. The reranking

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Bureaucracy facets</th>
<th>Correlation with rule breaking</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chaos</td>
<td>0.305***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divergent goals</td>
<td>0.302***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unwritten rules</td>
<td>0.290***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrimonialism</td>
<td>0.288***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Significance denoted by ***p < 0.001 (two-tailed t-tests).
game protected project managers from having to manage out those in a disadvantaged position on the normal curve. (Smith, 1990: 130–131)

Similarly, the prevalence of *unwritten rules* guiding operations is also, not surprisingly, strongly associated with ignoring written ones (rule breaking). A particularly distressing manifestation is reported in an ethnography of a hospital where many surgeons focus more attention on the informal protocol of thanking each other for referrals than they do on treating patients:

Dr White spent more time communicating with potential or actual referral sources than he did with his patients. He was intent on portraying himself to other physicians as a caring physician, even though he spent little time or effort in communication with, or sustained care of, his patients. When physicians referred patients to him he immediately wrote to that referring physician to inform him of the patient’s visit, his surgical decision, and the patient’s progress … He was acutely aware of the significance of other physicians’ impressions of him for his reputation and subsequent referrals. He deliberately cultivated the impression for other physicians that he attended to his patients as carefully as he attended to them. (Katz, 1999: 79)

This is the same hospital setting described above in which senior surgeons routinely violate hospital rules by absenting themselves from the surgeries they are supposedly performing leaving these in the hands of less experienced interns and residents. Rather than seeing this as an example of individual organizational deviance, we contend it is better understood as highlighting the fact that Goffmanesque impression management—a process that proceeds according to unwritten rules, rarely if ever acknowledged in the formal-rational structure at all—is a pervasive element of bureaucracy.

An organizational atmosphere based on *patrimonialism* also increases rule breaking—the substitution of personal authority for legal rational authority can open the door for behavioural responses that ignore written protocol and give greater weight to more personalized goals:

As a class member, I found both the presentation methods and the ‘Interaction’ program itself condescending … Two class members even mentioned during a session that the techniques should come in handy when trying to get our children to do things they don’t want to…. All the team leaders are so patronizing and paternalistic.

…The company instituted a policy of running the line right up until the buzzer sounded to signify quitting time. Until then, team members had been given about five minutes at the end of the day to finish the stations, clean up their areas, and put away tools…. ‘From that day on, whenever the line ran up to quitting time, all of us on the team dropped whatever we were doing and immediately walked out, leaving the team leader to lock up the tools and clean the area’. (Graham, 1995: 47, 116, 122)

Two observed patterns, in particular, provide opportunities for theoretical refinement and elaboration through re-immersion in the narrative accounts—a significant benefit of extended narrative accounts relative to more focused survey responses. In the following section we return in greater depth to the primary ethnographic accounts to investigate the relationship between *chaos and rule breaking* and the relationship between *patrimonial abuse and rule breaking*.

*Chaos and rule breaking.* Rule breaking is most often associated with chaotic settings—as evidenced by their positive statistical association. By examining cases in which chaos is *not* associated with rule breaking we can potentially gain greater insight into both the mechanisms involved and the limits of this relationship. This analytic strategy closely parallels that used by ethnographers as they
search for contradiction and anomalies. We find that cases of *rule following* even within chaotic environments are almost completely restricted to professional settings—medicine, engineering, social work and so on. Although such settings can be chaotic, this does not lead to rule breaking because of the absence of patrimonialism and divergent goals. These observations lead to the conclusion that although chaos is typically associated with rule breaking, it operates at least in part through the associated mechanisms of patrimonial abuse and divergent goals. In settings where abuse and divergent goals are absent—or at least constrained by employees’ autonomous power, as in many professional settings—chaos does not necessarily generate rule breaking. An example of employees enduring chaos without resorting to rule breaking is provided by an ethnography of nursing where chaos reigned supreme but, although nurses routinely complain and press for redress, professional standards precluded most forms of rule breaking:

I was really mad about the air conditioning. This building was designed with all this glass facing west into the sun so it would get really hot in the rooms, especially the small rooms … We finally took the temperatures of the windows and the metal was really hot, between 30–40 degrees centigrade, and so were the patients near them. We had to wait for over a year for some action … Later we had trouble because the air conditioning got so cold in the winter with all the glass. We had the patients all rugged up, and we were all shivering. Patients were getting hypothermic so we had to drag their beds out into the corridor to nurse them. We got a petition with 360 signatures … It took us two years to get that air conditioning changed. (Street, 1992: 238)

The underlying insight here is that behaviours more consistent with a formal-rational model are almost exclusively evidenced in settings with significant stakeholder empowerment, much as is suggested by Gouldner’s (1954) and Adler and Borys’ (1996) insights on representative and enabling bureaucracy—realities we are still seeking to realize but are far from achieving.

**Patrimonial abuse and rule breaking.** Patrimonialism frequently seems to encourage rule breaking. To examine this relationship further we again, as in the case of chaos and rule breaking, give special attention to the anomalous cases in which patrimonialism suppresses rather than encourages rule breaking—in other words, to cases in which direct *coercion appears to succeed* in bringing employee behaviour toward at least minimum compliance. Examining the settings in which the patrimonial abuse is associated with rule following, we find that these workplaces are very repressive—abuse is backed up by frequent dismissals and is socially allowed by labour forces that are predominantly female, minority, or migrant. In such settings employees are forced to put up with interpersonal abuse or risk being fired; rule breaking is simply not an option.

An example is provided by an ethnography of migrant workers in an electronics factory in the South China ‘economic miracle’ zone:

Because absenteeism was heavily penalized and fined, Chi-ying came to work even when she was sick. Many times, she had seen line girls suffering from fever or menstrual pain clinging to the line, sobbing or cursing. Overtime shifts were frequent and mandatory. In busy seasons, work lasted until eleven at night. If workers refused to do overtime work, they would first be fined and later dismissed if they repeatedly refused. (Lee, 1998: 6)

Resistance and related forms of rule breaking in such settings are difficult, especially given the dire consequences of being without employment and stranded in a region far from home. Thus, sadly, although patrimonialism may well engage resistance in some settings, in other settings—especially those characterized by the most repressive conditions and a relatively powerless
workforce—it is successful in securing at least attendance and surface compliance. This pattern from the narrative accounts is consistent with our core claim that these four features of bureaucracy are concrete manifestations of the importance and prevalence of personal power and domination within organizations.

Conclusions—taking Kafka seriously

One hundred years after Weber, bureaucracy is no longer an emerging form of social organization. It is hegemonic. Weber was extremely insightful in identifying the formal-rational aspects of bureaucracy that highlight its distinctiveness from prior patrimonial forms of hierarchy—and that serve as its legitimating public presentation of self. After 100 years it might have been expected that these formal-rational aspects would become even more ascendant and other aspects—including those carried forward from the past—would fade away. There is, however, ample evidence that this has not been the case, suggesting that the informal, patrimonial, unrationlized aspects of organizational life are deeply intertwined with, and re-generated by, formal-rational bureaucracy and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

It is our contention that any realistic critical theory of functioning bureaucracy in the 21st century must thus include explicit recognition of chaos, divergent goals, patrimonialism, and unwritten rules, all of which centrally arise from, or are responses to, the exercise of domination by powerful actors in organizations. These organizational features are not anomalies; 100 years of social science research since Weber has shown that they are more typical than atypical. They thus belong in the ideal typical model of bureaucracy just as much as hierarchy, trained expertise, distinct jurisdictions and exhaustive written rules. Scholars, even after observing that organizational dystopia based on domination and the abuse of power is common, too often reify Weber’s model as an appropriate baseline rather than actually theorizing what goes on every day in bureaucracies and developing alternative theoretical models. Bureaucrats like Weber’s model too. It casts a relatively benign face on bureaucracy—certainly relative to bureaucracy’s depiction by Kafka.

Rule breaking is endemic in organizations, including both small scale infractions by employees and massive frauds by CEOs. This reality raises fundamental questions about the continuing use of a model of bureaucracy resting solely on formal-rational elements. At least as much bureaucratic behaviour occurs outside formal-rational rules as within them. We need a critical theory of bureaucracy that includes rule breaking as an inherent feature of the bureaucratic form—not an anomaly perpetrated by pilfering employees or rogue CEOs, but one that is a necessary consequence of elite domination and exercise of power in organizations. While it is a useful starting point to understand that institutions are inhabited (Binder, 2007; Hallett and Ventresca, 2006), a fully developed critical theory of bureaucracy must also specify the channels down which the behaviours of these inhabitants run their course and the mechanisms they use to carry out their own agendas. As a preliminary step, we have identified four aspects of bureaucratic organization that are disavowed in the Weberian formal-rational model. We have shown these four aspects of bureaucratic organization to be widespread, even pervasive and extremely consequential for understanding organizational rule breaking. Investigation of other important organizational outcomes besides routine rule breaking, such as efficiency, growth, flexibility, creativity, absenteeism, morale and so on, could also be invigorated by utilizing a more realistic model of organizational functioning that fully incorporates Kafka’s darker vision of uncertainty, deceit, informal agreements and personal power, as well as Weber’s formal-rational model.
Consequences for society

The Kafkaesque aspects of bureaucracy overlooked by Weber’s formal-rational model exert strong pressures on organizational behaviour that produce deceit, duplicity, bad faith and non-accountability. Our argument is that these problems are not a result of the failings of bureaucracy, but rather reflect its inherent nature. Examples abound in contemporary society—mines and factories that ignore safety rules, corporations that pollute illegally and financial markets that create speculative bubbles rather than sustainable growth.

Why do such dystrophic outcomes continue to seem inevitable in bureaucracies? One partial answer is that more optimal outcomes are contingent on developing a critique of bureaucracy capable of guiding us as we seek to regulate formal organizations. A failure to fully recognize the darker side of bureaucracy allows problems to go unaddressed or to be interpreted as resulting from individual malfeasance (Katz, 1977) rather than being a predictable part of organizational functioning. As a consequence, deeply embedded dysfunctional patterns are allowed to continue uncontested. In addition, external oversight bodies lack a clear organizational model for identifying andremedying problems and enforcing solutions. Current strategies for regulating bureaucracies are simply inadequate to their task, in part because they are based on a flawed model of bureaucratic functioning. Audits check only surface appearances as if these were reality (Moran, 2002). Societies cycle between regulation and deregulation with an inadequate sense of the internal dynamics of bureaucracies (Hoogenboom and Ossewaarde, 2005; Kalev and Dobbin, 2006). Organizational policing is left to whistle-blowers, who are almost inevitably crucified for their efforts (Parmerlee et al., 1982).

The nearly completed movement of social, economic and cultural life to the bureaucratic form occasions a new urgency to regulating bureaucracies and addressing their inherent problems (Burrell, 1997; Edwards and Wajcman, 2005; Griffin and O’Leary-Kelly, 2004). Advances in accountability in the public sector, however, have not been paralleled by advances in accountability in the private sector (Shenhav, 2006). Gouldner’s dream of representative bureaucracy seems no nearer today than 50 years ago. Tensions and contradictions inherent in bureaucracy and arising from unchecked power, undertheorized chaos, widespread contestation, informal rules and pervasive patrimonialism and abuse are at least partly to blame (Held, 1980).

Consequences for social science theory and methodology

We offer an organizational theory following Kafka’s logic that specifies divergent goals, patrimonialism, unwritten rules and chaos as foundational elements of modern bureaucracy. The underlying dynamic that drives this logic is power and lack of accountability. Investigations of contemporary bureaucracies that are guided by a recognition of this prevailing logic of power, rather than by a model of bureaucracy as following a formal-rational logic, may yield significant insights into problems previously considered conundrums—such as the prevalence of routine rule-breaking within formal organizations and the growth of a corporate culture of pillage in the 21st century. The use of existing survey or archival data to evaluate a darker, Kafkan, model of bureaucracy, however, will encounter serious limits arising from the fact that these data are gathered and organized in a manner that largely reflects assumptions of the Weberian formal-rational model of bureaucracy—we simply cannot evaluate information not currently captured by our concepts and measurement instruments. The model developed for the current article is evaluated with direct observational data content coded from organizational ethnographies based on more grounded, in-depth observation that allows at least some breathing room from existing formal-rational concepts of bureaucracy (Barley and Kunda, 2001; Lee, 1999). This distance from prevailing concepts of bureaucracy is necessary for
allowing new information and insights to emerge. Eventually, new concepts can be incorporated in survey questionnaires and perhaps even in at least some (bureaucratic) forms of official record keeping. Until then, ethnography, and creative applications of existing data will be particularly important for informing new models of bureaucracy. Hopefully, these new models will allow a renewed push for accountability, effectiveness and democracy in organizational life.

Notes

We would like to thank Tom Maher for lending us ‘In the Penal Colony’, which inspired this project. We would also like to thank Steven Vallas, Don Tomaskovic-Devey and Martha Crowley for their extremely useful comments on earlier versions of this article.

1 Our theoretical orientation is primarily focused on power and abuse in bureaucracies; thus our focus is on the dysfunctional violation of rules. This is not to say, however, that rule breaking cannot, in some circumstances, be morally just (see Dodson, 2009, for an extended example).

2 The codesheet, coding protocol and data are available at (http://intra.sociology.ohio-state.edu/people/rdh/Workplace-Ethnography-Project.html). As with any content analysis project, we may have made errors in the interpretation of the texts or in the coding of the data. The data, however, are available for public scrutiny and re-analysis and we welcome suggestions, criticisms and alternative views on the coding of the narrative accounts.

3 Because the analysis includes a wide range of organizations it is important to consider alternative influences on employee rule breaking. In supplemental analyses we thus included controls for gender composition, minority group composition, occupational status and year of the study (to control for secular trends). The patterns reported here are consistent with and without these controls suggesting that the organizational dynamics involved are relatively stable across the latter half of the 20th century and across work forces with diverse characteristics.

References


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