***Forthcoming in*: Evolution of the Post-Bureaucratic Organization**

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**A POSTBUREAUCRACTIC AGE? CARICATURES, CLAIMS, AND COUNTER-EVIDENCE**

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*I was cherry picking; I was cherry picking dreams*

Girlpool

Few, if any, readers will not have experienced – as employees, customers, clients, students, citizens, and/or patients - frustrations, barriers, errors, diversions, indifference, deafness, delays, remoteness, inefficiencies, powerlessness, and irritation from what is commonly called ‘bureaucracy’.  Unlike the notion of ‘organizational culture’ which is conceived both as potentially malevolent (the toxic cause of one or other organizational dysfunctions) but also as potentially benevolent (changed culture as a remedial ‘magic dust’) – most characterizations of ‘bureaucracy’ are unambiguously bleak. Although, many examples of errors, omissions and injustices created, it is said, by one or other features of bureaucracy (techniques, rules, values, or whatever) are widely published, the absence of ‘bureaucracy’ is rarely, if ever, blamed nor is more ‘bureaucracy’ advanced as a solution.[[1]](#endnote-1) Bureaucracy, it is said, disables, it does not enable. A description of an organization as ‘bureaucratic’ is unequivocally critical. Labelling an individual as ‘a bureaucrat’ is insulting. In short, ‘bureaucracy’ is a “term of scorn” (Downs, 1965: 439).

Bureaucracy is criticised not only as oppressive and dysfunctional but *also* as obsolescent - its time is said to be over. A recurrent theme is that bureaucratic organizing is ‘not fit for purpose’ - “ill-suited to the novel problems we face in the twenty-first century” (Fung and Wright, 2003: 3), that it is an “organizational dinosaur helplessly involved in its death struggle” (cf. Olson, 2005: 1). The UK’s former Prime Minister Tony Blair said its civil service was hopelessly bureaucratic adding: "Time has passed them by" (Wintour,2013). Thus, many calls for replacement are not merely that this *ought* to occur, but that it *is* occurring (Child & McGrath, 2001; Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994; Kanter, 1989).

A variety of labels have been given to images and descriptions of alternative ways of organizing including: “the virtual corporation”; “the learning organization”; “the cellular form”; the “boundaryless corporation”; “the new work organization”; and the “spaghetti organization”. Castells (1996:164), for example, speaks of the “horizontal corporation” which is “a network of self-programmed, self-directed units based on decentralization”. However, indicating a belief in the inevitable replacement of bureaucracy, the prefix ‘post’ – in the sense of both succeeding and negating – is often included in naming the alternative(s). These post-labels include “post-hierarchical”; and “post-modern” organization. Over time, however, the label ‘post-bureaucratic’ has come to dominate the replacement discourse (e.g., Barley & Kunda, 2001; Budd, 2007; Castlenovo et al., 2016; Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994; Johnsen, 2016; Johnson et al., 2009; Kim and Han, 2015; Lippens, 2001; McHugh, et al. 2001; McKenna et al., 2010; Muthusamy, 2015; Talbot, 2016). Are organizations discarding bureaucracy? Are we now living in an age[[2]](#endnote-2) in which organizing is inevitably becoming post-bureaucratic? Is bureaucracy withering away?

**A New Age?**

Descriptions or predictions of change from bureaucracy to post-bureaucracy is conceived as widespread, or alternatively, as piecemeal. The latter type of depiction largely refers to replacement (current or future) of just some, not all, characteristics of bureaucracy – often focusing on change to just one organizational feature - or alternatively whilst change is seen as organization-wide - it is held to be possible only in what are, or will be, a minority of deviant or *avant-garde* organizations.  The focus of this chapter is on the former – descriptions, or predictions, of widespread de-bureaucratization.

Comprehensive claims are epochal – something fundamentally different is inevitably replacing bureaucracy. The age/era/epoch of bureaucracy, it is said, is already ended or is ending (Cameron, 2009).

Like the organizational equivalent of a Nietzscheian superman it will replace and surpass bureaucracy. A post-bureaucratic organization is/would be “a new organisational form completely different and free from bureaucracy” (cf. Tortsteinsen, 2012: 324) – one which has/will “have dispensed with the techniques, mind-sets, and values of bureaucracy” (Fairtlough, 2008).

Although not always clear in the discourses of aficionados, it would seem that, in the main - the idea of ‘post-bureaucracy’ is not advanced as a description of contemporary *organizations* but instead implies that the conditions impelling change favourable to post-bureaucracy and unfavourable to bureaucracy are in place. As Stefan Tengblad states: “[m]any authors (Drucker, 1988; Handy, 1989; Kanter, 1989; Morgan, 1993; Peters, 1989; Zuboff, 1988) claim that the emergence of post-bureaucracy has had, or at least, in the near future, will have, a profound impact on the way managers perform their work.” (2006: 1440) In short, societies, it is maintained, are *transitioning* from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic structures, values, and processes. Most aficionados implicitly suppose that these transforming conditions are universally present, but a handful, recognizing global diversity, picture an uneven speed of transition. Whichever, the notion of a post-bureaucratic age is not just aspirational – in the sense of merely *desiring* a future state – nor an analytical device such as an archetype - it purports to be an accurate representation of a changing world.

How far has the transition progressed? Aficionados disagree. At one extreme, Charles Heckscher, a leading commentator on, and indeed an advocate of, post-bureaucracy has observed that: “The discussion of post-bureaucratic organization is complicated by the fact that *it doesn't exist […]* [t]o my knowledge there is no concrete example that truly exemplifies the type – certainly not in business, certainly not on a large scale or for more than a short period.” (1994: 17)(emphasis added). Christopher Pollitt steers a middle ground - whilst claiming that post-bureaucratic organizations exist, cautions that “[i]t should … be acknowledged that in practice the global reach of ‘post bureaucracy’ may be rather less extensive than some of its pundits would have us believe” (2009: 199).

Are the post-bureaucratic aficionados correct about transformation? Whatever their differences about the extent to which change has occurred are they right that we are in an era of fundamental re-organization? This chapter considers and criticizes a number of claims and suppositions on which the actual, or immanent, arrival of post-bureaucratic organizing is widely based.

**Parochialism**

The existence of an age/epoch/era – as a historical discontinuity - as a comprehensive replacement of the past with something fundamentally different - has been widely critiqued (du Gay, 2003; McSweeney, 2006). But even if the possibility of such fundamental change is supposed - why should the present be post-bureaucratic – not one or a number of many other alternatives?

Post-bureaucratic is just one of a number of contemporary epochalist claims. Singular claims are rather incestuous: one happens to be alive just at the time of profound transition into what fortuitously is the theme of one’s research focus or organizational/societal change programme. There are echoes here of the narrower and somewhat less imperious notion of ‘turn’ – such as: ‘linguistic turn’, ‘cultural turn’, ‘visual turn’, and ‘ethnographic turn’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Unlike the hegemonic notion of a post-bureaucratic age which supposes a total society-wide transformation - a ‘turn’ usually limits the change largely to academic activity. Furthermore, whilst declarations of a ‘turn’ greatly overstate the degree of transformation - neglecting alternative ‘turns’ and by downplaying continuity – they do not, as a rule, claim achievement of a monopoly (Lowe, et al., 2012). Proclamations of the arrival of a post-bureaucratic age, however, disregard both rival epochal claims and the rugged continuity of that which it supposes is being superseded.

Contemporary announcements of the immanent demise of bureaucracy are ahistorical. Across the past century or so each generation has had its prophets of the end of bureaucracy. Each generation has been disappointed. But first it believes.

***Why Now?***

Across time antagonism towards bureaucracy fuels hope

and prophesies of its eliminations but additionally for each generation of epochal change aficionados, particular conditions or theories invigorate or reinvigorate the belief that bureaucracy’s ‘time’ has finally passed. The following three influences (amongst others) seem to play a part in generating or sustaining some contemporary epochalists belief in fundamental organizational transformation.

*(a) The enabling power of information systems*: The explosive growth of information communication technologies (ICT) it has been said, allows far greater flexibility and individual/team autonomy so that major constraints on achieving post-bureaucratic organizing have been eliminated (Lash & Urry, 1987; cf. Harris, 2006). Amongst the romantic banalities this techo-dreaming has generated is *Government 2.0 –* digital era governance for a post-bureaucratic age (Batorski and Hadden, 2010). Whilst dramatic increases in data accumulation, storage, analysis, *and* access capabilities have arguably created conditions which better enable post-bureaucratic processes they also facilitate the intensification and spread of bureaucracy (Eriksson-Zetterquist, et al., 2009; Exworthy, 2015; Im, et al., 2013).

(b*) Modernization*: The idea that bureaucracy is obsolescent draws - from a wider rhetoric of ‘modernization’. Bureaucracy is ‘old-fashioned’. As evident in the manifestos of the Italian (and other) Futurists, for example, totalizing and deterministic notions of ‘modernization’ are not new. But appeals to that notion ebb and flow. For the current commitment to post-bureaucracy it is noteworthy that from around the mid-1990s ‘modern’ and ‘modernization’ became widely used terms to justify particular political acts and organizational ‘reforms’. For example, in 1996 the UK the Labour Party was renamed ‘New Labour’. Following the 1997 general election victory, the Blair government justified just about every government action in the name of ‘modernization’ (Fairclough, 2001). In the United States during the Clinton presidency, the Democrats in the US were re-named ‘Modern Democrats’. The 1999 act which replaced the 1933 *Glass-Steagall Act* and removed the firewalls between retail and speculative banking was called the *Gramm-Leach-Bliley Financial Services Modernization Act*. The Blair and Clinton administrations were at the forefront of representing ‘modernization’ as the eliminator of ‘bureaucracy” (Koven, 2009). Not only was ‘bureaucracy’ seen as old-fashioned, it was also criticized as a barrier to ‘modernization’. Current administrations continue the conflation, in public at least, of modernization and post-bureaucracy (see Cameron, [2009](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09540962.2016.1140977#CIT0001), for instance). The message of ‘modernisation’ by post-bureaucracy, especially to the public sector, was carried from the Anglo-American world to many keen and gullible uncritical audiences with power in other countries by a range of transmitters - for example - by KPMG to Denmark, Sweden and Norway (Torsteinsen, 2012).

(c) *New Public Management*: This is a popular, and popularized, description of yet another wave of crusades to ‘reform’ public sector management (McSweeney, 2006). Since NPM commenced roughly in the 1980s, the continuing inclusion of ‘new’ in its name is rather dated. But that description persists in part because of the spurious sense of freshness the label ‘new’ provides; in part because NPM’s espoused aims have in the main not been achieved; and in part as it conceals the underlying cost reducing and public ownership shrinking motivations. Because of the particularly intense condemnation of public sector management as ‘bureaucratic’, many NPM supporters, implementers, and commentators label every organizational change in the public sector as ‘post-bureaucratic’. As a major aim of NPM has, purportedly, been to eliminate, bureaucracy, it became, and remains, a political requirement, that changes in ways of organizing be represented as anti-bureaucratic. The notion of a rupture, of a discontinuity, in ways of organizing has not only achieved some significance in organization theory but much more extensively it has been given the status of necessity amongst most of the political elite.

What has actually happened? A host of studies have found the continuation of bureaucracy - indeed many report an intensification of bureaucracy. In Queensland, Australia, for instance, Parker and Bradley found a “continued dominance of bureaucratic values within public sector organisations despite the post-bureaucratic discourse of NPM” (2004: 210). In the UK, Reed and Anthony, 2003 state that “despite its underlying, populist, anti-bureaucracy rhetoric and ideology, the NPM is in many ways classically bureaucratic in that centralized command and control mechanisms are supported by a heavy reliance on audit and inspection via performance management […] the resilience and strength of traditional, horizontal, structures (as opposed to vertical network ones) is actually strengthened under such a control regime” (in Morris and Farrell, 2007: 1578). Similarly, Torsteinsen states that “[i]n Norway and Sweden, public management reforms, inspired and promoted by post-bureaucratic ideas, have led to increased formalization” (2012: 324).

NPM includes not only reorganization of activities over which the State retains direct control - but also termination, privatization, or agentisation of some activities. However, a decrease in state control of economic matters and a reduction in the type and scope of some state activities does not also mean that the organizations which undertake those activities are any less bureaucratic nor that the intensity of state surveillance of employees, citizens and subjects is reduced.

Bureaucratic intensification might seem at odds with the dramatic growth in the influence of neo-liberalism which has increasingly shaped the policies of many governments. But that view is a partial understanding of neo-liberalism which is characterised not only by regulatory reductions - but also by regulatory (including surveillance) intensifications. The growing involvement of non-state actors rather than decreasing bureaucracy has increased it (Bromley and Meyer, 2015; Citton, 2013; Hibou, 2015; McSweeney and Duncan, 1998).

**Organizational Uniformity**

The notion of an age/epoch/era supposes that each such time periodization is dominated by a singular mode of organizing. As du Gay states: “… reductionism is necessary to any periodization” (2003: 666). Dividing historical time into a bureaucratic age (assumed to be past) and its replacement with a post-bureaucratic age, supposes (amongst other matters) that the organizational values, practices, rules, techniques have had, and will have, uniformity and that the conditions, which will create the new organizational unity, are in place.

The notion that organizations are, or should be, unities  - monocratic - is popular among policy makers, management consultancy firms, and in some academic arena. The latter includes representation of organizations as having a single, common, coherent, organizational culture and the essentialist notion that organizations have ‘core values’ (as descriptive not normative). Similarly, the idea that there is one-known-replicable-best-way to manage also echoes a (common) coherent view of organizations.

But whilst a monocratic image of organizations remains influential, the dominant view, and that which overwhelmingly underlies the notion of organizations in most leading scholarly journals, is that organization - to paraphrase anthropologist Edward Burnet Tylor – is a thing of “shreds and patches” (in Smelser, 1992: 5). In contrast to a unified conception of organization, that literature largely conceives organization as a mosaic of conflict, contradiction, paradox, ambiguity, heterogeneity, and resistance - not as sites of  “mystic harmony” (Geertz, 1965: 145)(Fink, et al., 2012; Martin, 2002). An organization is a historically contingent conjunction of disparate characteristics that do not fit together coherently. Recall that Weber did not represent his descriptions of bureaucracy as an empirical description of organizations, but as an ideal/pure type.  As Bromley and Meyer observe, “bureaucracies never worked according to [that] theory” (2015: 11).

Was past organizing uniformly bureaucratic? If we are in a post-bureaucratic age, the past ‘age’ must have been purely bureaucratic – the future free of bureaucracy. But the past was not pure (Katz and Eisenstaedt, 1960). Historical examples of soft-bureaucratic, or non-bureaucratic, features can readily be found.  Two examples.

*Nazi Germany*: Organization in, and by, Nazi Germany is widely represented as unalloyed bureaucracy. But authoritarian hierarchy and surveillance - such as the chronic inspection and control of factory production and systematic record-keeping at extermination camps -was not the only organizational mode. Organizing in both the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe, for instance, whilst having bureaucratic features, as every organization does, also had major non-bureaucratic characteristics. Although located in, and drawing personnel from, a society where strict discipline and obedience to one’s superior was expected and coercively imposed, Wehrmacht officers and NCOs, had an extreme level of independence of action in what was called *Auftragstaktik*,[[4]](#endnote-4) or mission tactics. An illustration is *Generalleutnant* (Lieutenant-General) Heinz Guderian, commander of XIX *Panzerkorps*, order to his units in advance of the invasion of France. In the spirit of *Auftragstaktik* when he told them they all had a "ticket to the last station," which were the respective towns on the French coast. How his troops got there was entirely up to them (Muth, 2011). The Luftwaffe, according to Meir Finkel “encouraged cognitive flexibility, initiative, and original thinking [...] It was an organization that was willing to countenance overstepping the chain of command” (2011: 135)(see also Naveh, 1997; Price, 1977). How was this possible? Was it a consequence of the educational reforms introduced by the Weimar government? And/or was it built on the doctrinal foundations set out by Clausewitz? Or what? Whatever the reasons, even organizations of the past, such as the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe, represented in movies, television, and elsewhere, as examples of unadulterated bureaucracies, including extreme centralization, rigid hierarchy, inflexibility, and unquestioning obedience had many features of what is today called ‘post-bureaucracy’.[[5]](#endnote-5) Organizations of the past were not pure bureaucracies, but instead were varieties of combinations of bureaucracy and post- or rather non- bureaucracy (Baron, Hannan & Burton, 1999; Courpasson, 2000; Courpason and Clegg, 2006; March, Schulz, & Zhou, 2000; Walton, 2005).

*Informal Organization*: Various authors - contemporaries of Weber and subsequently - have objected to the adequacy of his ideal-type bureaucracy *as a description* of organization pointing to a lack of integration, goal diversity, and conflict. Organizations are not all-inclusive, all-encompassing mechanisms of pure control. There are “often loose connections between formal structures, daily practices, and intended outputs” (Bromley and Meyer, 2015: 3). The existence in the past (and present) of what, in short, may be called ‘informal organization’ - including unspoken rules and intra-organizational networks that may work to circumvent or enable the functioning of formal procedures - is further evidence that organizations of the past were not pure bureaucracies. Over many decades a substantial number of studies have found that contextual considerations and tacit knowledge (Lam, 2000; Polanyi, 1966) can be, and may often be, invoked or relied on “in constituting or modifying normal bureaucratic decisions or courses of action” and that “members of bureaucracies are not only able, but positively obliged, to invoke and interpret bureaucratic rules and procedures in *ad hoc* ways” (Heritage, 1987: 252). Thus: non-bureaucratic phenomena are not just features of (some) contemporary organizations (Grey & Sturdy, 2009).  What Pollitt has called “post-bureaucratic organizational innovations” may be changes new within some individual organizations or sectors, but they are not innovations in the sense of being newly invented. Without exception, they have long been practiced with varying degrees of intensity and visibility in what have never been pure bureaucracies. Bureaucracy and non-bureaucracy are not “mutually exclusive or binary concepts” (Johnson, et al., 2009:40).

Significant within the academy for insertion into managerial and other discourses of the notion of a new age/epoch/era as a discontinuity - a sharp segregation of past - and both the old and new as homogeneous - was a particular reading of work of Michel Foucault which had become very fashionable. That reading, or rather misreading, interpreted his notion of epoch as a unity.

Foucault himself was, however, scathing about a homogeneous notion of an epoch. “Nothing you see, he stated, “is more foreign to me than the quest for a sovereign, unique and constraining form. I do not seek to detect ... the unitary spirit of an epoch, the general form of its consciousness ... I am a pluralist” (in Burchell et al., 1991: 55). And “I think we should have the modesty to say to ourselves that, ... the time we live in is not the unique or fundamental or irruptive point in history where everything is completed and begun again” (Raulet, 1983: 206)(see also Alvesson, 1995; Smart, 1992).

***Confirmatory Bias***

Central to organization theories are conceptions of tasks and challenges and evaluations of proposed, and enacted, engagements with those problems. Should a way of organising be judged by its impact on all stakeholders or just by narrower notions of efficiency or effectiveness (McSweeney, 1988; 2008)? For some aficionados, post-bureaucracy is, in effect, a way of eliminating, or at least constraining the adverse effects of “monstrous organization” (Thanem, 2011) on employees and others. For others, post-bureaucracy is also, or is exclusively, to be judged functionally – as more productive, as more responsive, as more economical - than bureaucracy. A commitment to post-bureaucracy – for these or other reasons – may generate an unwitting bias in selecting evidence. This is, of course, a danger not unique to advocacy of post-bureaucracy. Many studies suggest that people are prone to the inferential error of confirmatory/confirmation bias - generic terms for the ways we tend to seek only supportive evidence for our supposition/hypothesis and conversely tend not to seek, and perhaps even to avoid, counter indicative information and that which is supportive of alternative explanations (Klayman & Ha, 1987; Nickerson, 1998; Sloman, 2005; Sloman & Lagnado, 2004; Wason, 1960). Selection and validation of information that would confirm a pre-established and focal belief or hypothesis is given priority – even exclusivity (Rajsic, et al., 2014). We are all prone to the ‘double standard’ of subjecting an undesired conclusion to much tougher standards than evidence supporting other conclusions (Lieberson, 1992; Kahneman & Tversky, 1973; Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

In the post-bureaucratic aficionado literature two types of confirmatory bias are noteworthy: *over-estimation* (evidence of post-bureaucracy is exaggerated) and *disregard* (evidence of bureaucratic intensification is ignored). The former takes two forms. A few, sometimes just one, change, said to be post-bureaucratic, within an organization is treated as characterising the entire mode of management within that organization. And/or individual organizations, described as post-bureaucratic, are taken to represent multiple organizations. Both types are discussed below.

*(a) Representing the singular as the general*: Not surprisingly, confirmatory bias has led to over-stating the post-bureaucratic features of some organizations or organizational locations. An example is the widespread assertion that firms in Silicon Valley - an icon of economic development which many countries and regions seek to replicate - are post-bureaucratic. And that this is a major reason for their success. These methods of organizing have been described as “paradigmatic of post-bureaucracy” (Furusten & Garsten, 2000). Gary Hamel states that to become more innovative corporations should “bring Silicon Valley inside” (2007: 70).

AnnaLee Saxenian’s *Regional Advantage: Culture and Competition in Silicon Valley and Route 128* is probably one of the best-known[[6]](#endnote-6) explanations of the business success of California’s Silicon Valley. She attributed its success to a “regional net-work based system that promotes collective learning and flexible adjustment amongst specialist producers of complex related technologies” (p. 2); its co-operative competition: the “unusual mix of cooperation and competition” (p. 57) and “the functional boundaries within the firms are porous” (p. 3) and other ‘post-bureaucratic’ ways of organizing.

She compares her studies in the Valley with her studies of firms in Route 128 near Boston which she argues are characterised by less effective “vertically integrated and hierarchical” management i.e. bureaucratic. But are her generalisations about a common Silicon Valley style of organizing correct? And is her attribution of success to that type also correct? The short answer is: we don’t know and there are grounds for skepticism. Her generalizations about organizational practices in the Valley are based on data that is demonstrably not representative. Whilst Hewlett-Packard is carefully studied, effectively excluded from her review were: many large and medium sized firms, such as Lockheed/Martin – the single largest industrial employer in the Valley, but headquartered outside the Valley. Also excluded from her study were many branch operations of foreign, especially Asian firms; and failed firms which might, or might not, have the features to whose influence success is attributed (Markusen, 1999). In contrast with Saxenian’s views, and claims reliant on her data and analysis, Baron, Hannon and Burton’s (1999) study of 170 young, high-technology firms in Silicon Valley – supposedly paradigmatic of post-bureaucracy firms – found bureaucratic features in all of them.

Similarly, outside of Silicon case studies of knowledge-intensive firms – such as consultancies and IT firms, paradigmatic post-bureaucratic firms, have identified bureaucratic practices and discourse in them (Kärreman et al., 2002). It is notable that Stefan Tengblad’s comparative replication of Mintzberg’s (1973) study “thirty years on” found that claims for the emergence of “radically different” managerial work were “much exaggerated” (2006: 1437)(see also, Hazzard, et al. 2011).

*(b) Representing part of an organization as characterising the whole*: Some examples of this mode of analysis are considered below.

Pollitt (2009: 210) describes four “Illustrative cases of post-bureaucratic organizations”, namely, the UK’s National Health Service (NHS); the Dutch telecommunications regulations agency, the management of the 2005 Hurricane Katrina, and “rapid ‘ churn ’ in public service performance” through which “[i]ndividual indicators are re-defined or replaced, groups of indicators and aggregate indices are constantly altered or improved. “

The first three are “organizations” in the sense of being entities with defined boundaries, purposes, responsibilities, and structures – each is a “socially authorized locus for action” (Bromley and Meyer, 2015: 24). The fourth is not an “organization” but a way of organizing. In any event, whilst the organizing of each of these activities may have non-bureaucratic features, it is clear that each also has classic bureaucratic characteristics. Morris and Farrell, for instance, studied ten UK public sector organizations, including the NHS, to determine the extent to which ‘post-bureaucratic’ organizational forms have been introduced to the UK public sector. They concluded that whilst certain structural changes have occurred – for example in relation to job security for some categories of employees – claims that any of the organizations, including the NHS, had post-bureaucratic characteristics were “misleading” (2007: 1575).

Even if a characteristic of an organization, whether an “innovation” (Pollitt, 2009) or not, is post/non-bureaucratic - generalising from that organizational aspect to the entire organization is clearly invalid (Lieberson, 1991). In effect, there is what Bertrand Russell (1913) and others (following Hume) called the ‘problem of induction’ – an unbridgeable inferential gap between the singular and the general. But the error is even more egregious when the part said to be a manifestation of a post-bureaucratic organization is not post-bureaucratic. For example, out of eleven “innovations” - any one of which said by Pollitt to identify a post-bureaucratic organization - the eighth is: “The principle that decisions should be recorded is maintained, but the ways in which such recording takes place have become faster and more varied most notably through electronic systems” (2008: 200). Substitute ‘carbon paper’ (invented in 1801 by Pellegrino Turri, an Italian inventor and patented in 1806) or ‘typewriters (which began to become commercially successful from around the 1860s) for “electronic systems” and the claimed radical transformation from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic disappears.

The second illustration of invalid generalisation is the international manufacturing company Oticon, headquartered in Denmark. This firm was and continues to be widely upheld as an example of a post-bureaucratic company. It has, for example, been said that the company metamorphised into a “21st Century organization” (1994), an illustration of what would in the new epoch replace bureaucracies of the past epoch. Heinrik Holt Larsen states that at Oticon “the unthinkable proved not only thinkable, but also doable and deliverable” (2002: 37).

In 1990-91 Oticon underwent extensive organizational change. A decentralised networking organization - labelled the “spaghetti organization” - one which was flat and flexible e.g. with no formal hierarchical structure or traditional management positions was created. Enabling processes included: drastically reducing paper communications, introducing comprehensive information technology systems, networks, open space offices;[[7]](#endnote-7) in which each employee had a uniform drawer-less cart or trolley (i.e. a filing cabinet on wheels containing their computer, telephone, and limited space for files) which could be moved about the office - even the CEO did not have an office – he too had a trolley; transferring managerial authority to project groups or individuals; replacing memos with informal dialogue as the accepted mode of communication, installing several coffee bars to create opportunities for informal exchange of information and experience; building a wide staircase where people “bumped into each” which replaced the pre-existing elevators (Larsen, 2002).

Radical and anti-bureaucratic as these changes were – Oticon is a single company from which generalisations about other organizations or underlying trends cannot validly be made. Despite many articles which lauded the changes – so many that according to Nicolai Foss it was “a cottage industry” (2003: 332) - and the additional publicity from best-selling IMD and Harvard Business School case studies - few, if any, other organizations have attempted such a deep-seated transformation.

In any event, Oticon did not survive as a post-bureaucratic organization. The on-going use of the company as an example of post-bureaucracy ignores the fact that “the spaghetti organization has largely been abandoned” (Foss, 2003: 333). Within just a few years the abandonment had occurred in favour of a return to a more bureaucratic organization. To many observers, a prominent feature of bureaucracy is its staying power. As Weber (1946: 228) noted, "once it is fully established, bureaucracy is among those social structures which are the hardest to destroy."

*Intensification*: The limitations of epochalists’ claims are not only the exaggeration of the extent of post-bureaucracy and the continuing presence of bureaucracy, but also their inattention to its intensification.

The crucial test of a valid generalization is not finding confirming examples – that is usually easy – but the absence of significant counter-examples. Given, as it has been argued, that contemporary (and past) organizations may have diverse, heterogeneous, features, examples of what are deemed to be non-bureaucratic features can be identified quite readily. But generalising from these accounts ignores the vast amount of on-going bureaucracy and tells us nothing about the scale or frequency of these features.

A comprehensive account of increasing bureaucratization is not possible, not least because the data is incomplete. However, prevailing data from multiple sources paint a consistent picture of growing internal and external monitoring in/of most organizations. The examples described below, it is suggested, are sufficient to refute a key building block of post-bureaucratic epoch assertions: the growing dilution of bureaucracy.

No arena appears to be exempt from increasing bureaucratization. The process has been identified in the following sectors or activities, amongst others: health; creativity; social work; child care; deviance; biotechnology; torture; innovation; the judiciary; arrests; voluntary sports organization; tax administration; laboratories; science; medicine; palliative care; environmental management; safety; fishery policing; compliance; sanctity; churches; professions; hospitals; museums; stock exchanges; and mental health organization (see Antoun, 2006; Bazzoli, 2004; Booth, 2014; Bromley and Meyer, 2015; Burton and Van den Broek, 2009; Coccia and Cadario. 2014; Dekker, 2014; Hibou, 2015; Hwang and Powell, 2009; James and Field, 1992; Lindquist, 2006; MacIndoe and Barman 2012; McSweeney, 2006; Waitzkin, et al., 2001; Walsh, and Lee, 2015, for instance).

Internal and external information gathering, record-keeping, and scrutiny has been intensified by the growth of accreditation bodies (Hallström, 2004); the explosion of multidimensional league tables with multiple formal criteria for schools, universities, hospitals, and elsewhere; the increasing accountability of for-profit and not-for profit corporations for their diversity, equality, safety, and sustainability policies and practices (Dekker, 2014).

Since the early 1980s there has been a remarkable growth of organized governance by international and regional rules, regulations, directives, standards, and other instruments of coercive or institutionalized control, (Brunsson, et al., 2003). International standard setters include the International Organization for Standardization (ISO)[[8]](#endnote-8) which with its sister organization, the International Electro-technical Commission (IEC), today jointly account for well over three-quarters of known international technical standards *and* their annual output of agreed standards has doubled since the early 1980s (Mattli and Büthe, 2003, 2011).

Responses to past and anticipated threats (real or imaginary), including terrorism (notably after 9/11 and later bombings in London and Madrid), urban riots, climate change, tainted blood in France, food-related scandals in Germany and Belgium, the BSE crisis in the UK and the regional or globe-wide effects financial crises have led to ever more regulation and surveillance, including the establishment or expansion of dedicated organizations. The bureaucratic response to the financial crisis of 2007/2008 include: Basel III (2010-11) whose regulations are 616 pages compared with Basel II (2004) (347 pages) which in turn was larger than Basel I (1988) which was a mere 30 pages. Since the beginning of the 2007/8 financial crisis there have been more than 14,200 new financial regulations worldwide. In the UK alone the regulations from one of the bodies, which succeeded the Financial Services Authority, is circa 4,000,000 words. Nobuchika Mori, commissioner of Japan's Financial Services Agency, said at the 6th Annual Pan Asia Regulatory Summit in October 2015 that: “the factories manufacturing new regulations are still operating at their full capacity." [[9]](#endnote-9) Whether this regulatory enlargement is good or bad, necessary or dysfunctional, is not considered here. But clearly it is not post-bureaucratic. On the contrary, it is an expansion of bureaucracy.

The bureaucratization even of terrorist organizations has been reported:

“From 2005 through at least 2010, senior leaders of al Qaeda in Iraq kept spreadsheets detailing the salary payments to hundreds of fighters, among many other forms of written records. And when the former al Qaeda military commander Mohammed Atef had a dispute with Midhat Mursi al-Sayid Umar, an explosives expert for the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, in the 1990s, one of his complaints was that Umar failed to turn in his receipts for a trip he took with his family” (Shapiro, 2012 cited in Bromley and Meyer, 2015: fn 32).

Finally, consider ones own experience of organization. Many readers of this book will be employees of, or students in, universities. How many have found a dilution of bureaucracy? Whilst there are international differences – in every country I have direct experience of, or have read about, bureaucratization of research and teaching has grown, not diminished. One of the many manifestations of this is a widespread (universal?) rise in the proportion of administrative staff and expenditures on administrative matters. Additionally, the proportion of most academics’ time spent on administrative, i.e. bureaucratic matters has also grown (see Berg, L.N. and Pinheiro, R., 2016; Clare, and Richard, 2016; Dowling-Hetherington, 2014; Gornitzka, et al., 1998; Lisyutkin, and Froumin, 2015; Murphy, 2013; Olaskoaga-Larrauri, et al., 2015, for instance).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Are modes of organizing largely constrained, enabled, *and*

constructed by societal institutions and cultures?  In short, are organizations built, as Bromley & Mayer state: “to conform to, and enact,  … [societal] ideologies as much as to accomplish ends” (2015: 23)? Or alternatively - as the fashionable agentic notion of ‘leadership’, emphasises – are modes of organising determined within organizations? If the former (societal shaping or somewhat less deterministically - embedding) is supposed, a necessary condition for the emergence of a post-bureaucratic epoch is a post-bureaucratic society (cf. Johnson *et al*. 2009). If the latter, such an epoch requires that organizational ‘leaders’ have somehow predominantly decided to switch from bureaucratic to post-bureaucratic organizing (cf. Tourish, 2013). Whichever, if any, the empirical consequences of circumstances or choice would be a growth of post-bureaucratic organising *and* a decline in bureaucratic organizing. But the evidence set out above suggests that whilst non-bureaucratic features can be identified in organizations, as can anecdotal examples of de-bureaucratization, the extent to which either occurs has been greatly exaggerated. Furthermore, it has been argued that there is evidence of bureaucratic intensification.

For some belief in a post-bureaucratic age seems to be nourished by wishful-thinking, for others it’s a naive or misleading labelling of every organizational change (especially in the public) as ‘post-bureaucratic’. Perhaps, there is a positive role for the notion of post-bureaucracy as a *regulative ideal* – an unattainable but nonetheless *productive* aspiration or myth – which may help in illuminating and constraining excesses of bureaucracy - or what is labelled bureaucracy - and suggest the possibility of combining bureaucracy with non-bureaucratic or hybrid ways of organizing. But the claim of rupture, of the real or inevitable abandonment of bureaucracy is an unrealised and unrealisable utopia/dystopia – a fantasy unconstrained by recognition of social feasibility.

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1. And yet, ironically, a regular response to organizational problems and failings (whether said to have been caused by ‘bureaucracy’ or not) are calls for what *de facto* is wider or more intensive bureaucracy.   [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Within the earth sciences the term ‘age’ (and ‘epoch’, ‘era’) have specific meanings and duration. For example, an ‘age’ is 99 millions of years <http://www.stratigraphy.org/index.php/ics-chart-timescale>. In this chapter, these notions are used in their colloquial sense. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Richardson goes further an claims that we are living in an “ethnographic era” (1999: 660) [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Auftragstaktik* long-predated the Nazi regime. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Whilst this neo/post-bureaucratic characteristic gave both the Wehrmacht and the Luftwaffe advantages, it also had a downside. Naveh (1997) argues that it reduced the ability to adequately centralize knowledge of problems experienced during campaigns in France and Poland – including technical problems related to tank deficiencies and fighting techniques. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 10,143 citations (Google Scholar - as at 8 February 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. “Open space offices” or “open plan offices” can be, and often are, a means of greater not less control (Bergström Oldham and Brass, 1979). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Within the past few decades, ISO has begun issuing standards for administrative processes (Brunsson, et al. 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. I am grateful to Philip Booth for this information and data. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)