During the past century the successive advances in technology have been accompanied by corresponding advances in organization. Complicated machinery has had to be matched by complicated social arrangements, designed to work as smoothly and efficiently as the new instruments of production. — Aldous Huxley

Macrosociologists do not maintain that material conditions are all that matter. Material conditions affect social structures—primary groups and secondary organizations. These social structures are considered second-order variables in understanding sociocultural systems. Sociologists have examined such structural characteristics as capitalism, the state, religious institutions, kinship networks, and community organizations and groups. This chapter focuses upon one general form of structural organization: bureaucracy. Specifically, we will examine the characteristics, causes, and consequences of bureaucratic organization.

In 1921, Max Weber published his systematic study of bureaucracy in *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft (Economy and Society)*, and this seminal work continues to inform modern studies of the phenomenon.
C. Wright Mills—arguably the most controversial of all modern sociologists—picked up and extended Weber’s analysis significantly, writing on the impact of bureaucracy and rationalization on the “tang and feel” of American life in *White Collar* ([1951] 1973), as well as on the political and economic life of a nation in *The Power Elite* (1956) and on the social sciences in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). Mills was a committed Weberian; the concepts of rationalization and bureaucratization permeate his sociology and form the foundation of his more radical critiques of American society. *The Power Elite* centres upon the growth and increasing centralization and enlargement of government, the military, and corporate bureaucracy, as well as the impact of this on democracy—an elaboration and update, if you will, of Weber’s work on the essential incompatibility of bureaucracy and democracy. The theme of *The Sociological Imagination* is that this same bureaucratic growth has essentially emasculated the social sciences, turning their methods into tools for increasing control and manipulation by the bureaucratic state and promoting the process of academic specialization to the point of rendering the social sciences irrelevant to understanding and addressing the social problems of our societies. George Ritzer (1993) also expands on Weber’s concerns with rationalization, updating the concept by coining the term *McDonaldization* and examining its consequences for the individual and society.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF BUREAUCRACY**

Weber ([1921] 1968, 956–58) details the following characteristics of an ideal bureaucracy, an organization designed for the efficient attainment of goals:

1. *Official positions* with fixed duties and jurisdictional areas (and sometimes the length of service of the office holder), as well as a fixed salary tied to the functions of the office rather than the amount of work performed. Employment and promotion
within the bureaucracy are based upon well-defined qualifications and performance.

2. A hierarchy of graded authority, in which authority to give commands required for the operation of the bureaucracy is distributed. This hierarchy is one in which higher offices supervise lower offices, information flows from lower to higher offices, decisions are made in offices in accordance with their jurisdictional areas and competence, and commands flow down the chain.

3. Written documents that prescribe rules, laws, or administrative regulations. These prescriptions are both stable and exhaustive, and they define the jurisdiction and duties of offices as well as the sanctions that office holders may invoke to enforce their rule.

4. Specialization, as the bureaucracy increasingly requires expert training and credentialing in management or highly specialized training in technical fields.

5. Professionalism, which requires the office holders and support staff to attend to the regular and continuous fulfillment of the duties and responsibilities of their office. They must spend a set amount of time performing their official duties and must not mix those duties with their personal lives. This professionalism demands impersonality in the treatment of individuals since a bureaucracy’s efficiency rests upon decision making based on rational rules. Professional authority entitles its holder to regulate matters only in the abstract; professionals must not be influenced in their rule by personal privilege, relationship, or favour. Therefore, abstract rules designed to be exhaustive are established to guide the office holder in decision making.

6. Management based upon written documentation providing rules and procedures for all routine matters. These rules are more or less stable, although a bureaucracy is always in the state of bureaucratizing, refining its rules and regulations to encompass more and more cases, to improve its efficiency in the attainment of its goals.
As envisioned by Weber, the bureaucratic ethos evolves over time in different places around the world. As one goes back in history, one is struck by its complete absence or, at best, its incomplete character. It attains its purest, most rational form in modern times, although elements of early bureaucracies can be found in ancient Egypt, Rome, and China, and in the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. However, these bureaucracies, though large and complex, often contained feudal or patrimonial elements such as inheritance of positions (Weber, [1946] 1958, 204). The administration of previous states, religions, and economic enterprises, Weber argues, was done through rulers who exercised their authority through informal ties with trusted friends, table companions, or court servants. Their authority was not always precisely defined, and they were often not guided by rules but by personal relationships or favours; their offices were rarely separated from their personal lives. Monetary support for administration took the form of land, or tithes, rather than a fixed salary. Only with the modern state and in the more advanced institutions of capitalism did bureaucracy appear in its purest form.

Weber’s characteristics of bureaucracy are, of course, those of an “ideal type”; they are logically consistent features of a bureaucracy that are not affected by the interests of other institutions or powerful individuals. Anyone who has spent any time working in a bureaucracy (and that includes almost all adults in the modern world) knows of instances when bureaucratic ideals have been ignored—hiring someone without the proper credentials, promoting someone by virtue of relationship rather than performance, ignoring long-established rules when someone of rank makes a serious mistake. Nevertheless, Weber’s characteristics are those of an ideal bureaucracy whose participants are striving to achieve its goals with the greatest efficiency; violation of the bureaucratic ethos has a deleterious effect on the efficient attainment of the organization’s goals and is viewed by many in modern hyperindustrial societies as an affront to deeply held bureaucratic values. Weber’s “ideal type” thus serves as a measuring rod by which we can evaluate real institutions and assess their degree of bureaucratization.¹
According to Weber, bureaucracy in its fully articulated form is a relatively recent historical development. Bureaucracy is, in essence, social organization founded on goal-directed rational behaviour, and its rise has had revolutionary effects on every social structure it has touched ([1921] 1968, 1002–3). Bureaucracy proliferated in response to the increasing number and complexity of administrative tasks associated with the evolution of the modern state and the growth of capitalist enterprises. Although bureaucratization can occur in a variety of specific contexts, in early societies where bureaucracy first appeared, it was associated with massive construction activities such as erecting pyramids and temples or building and regulating complex irrigation systems, as well as with training and deploying large standing armies, and with developing public financing systems to support such activities (971–72). But bureaucratic organization is suitable for the attainment of a wide array of goals.

In modern societies, bureaucratization arises from these sources as well as from the increasing complexity of the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services and from an expanding number of people engaged in an ever more detailed division of labour. A growing population means not only more people but also a geometric growth in the interrelationships among these people, which requires greater coordination and control of their activities. As more and more goods and services become commodified, they stimulate demand for even more varied wants that cannot be satisfied within the confines of the family, the community, or even the local economy. Corporate bureaucracies have grown as more people have become integrated into the capitalist economy as both producers and consumers. The rise of commodification has also stoked the growth of corporate bureaucracy, as a wide variety of goods and services are being introduced into the domestic and international economy. Capital has created new “needs” in food, shelter, entertainment, medicine, and a host of other areas. The production of goods becomes increasingly complex and technologically sophisticated, the distribution
national or global, thus necessitating bureaucracy to coordinate and control the processes. Associated with this is the increasing division of labour, often stretching over continents and encompassing hundreds of specialties, thousands of workers, massive capital machinery, large amounts of raw materials of different types, huge inventories of parts, complex transportation schedules and time tables—all of which requires ever greater bureaucratic organization to coordinate and control its growth. Along with corporate economies, government bureaucracy has grown in order to fulfill many functions: to assist corporate bureaucracies in their expansion of markets, to regulate the highs and lows of the economy, to police both the interactions among companies and the financial system, to regulate trade among states and nations, to provide a criminal justice system for an increasingly complex economic system and a diverse population, and to provide for the nation’s military defence and offence (the US Department of Defense is perhaps the largest bureaucratic enterprise on earth). The growth of both private and public bureaucracies is rooted in infrastructural intensification—the growth of population, production, and the division of labour (Weber [1946] 1958, 212–14).

The capitalist system demands that public administration be conducted in accordance with bureaucratic principles of coordination, rational rule making, continuity, and efficiency. For the capitalist, the arbitrary and capricious rule of kings and emperors, with their confiscatory taxes and favour to nobles and friends, is abhorrent. The capitalist desires predictability, calculability, steadiness, and precision. Above all, capitalism requires laws that free labourers to work in response to demand and to protect the rights of property and finance. The expansion of markets requires the expansion of government at all levels to provide the infrastructure for economic activities: roads, railways, canals, mail, electrical grids, airports, sewer and gas lines, bridges, communications systems, and a host of other infrastructural needs (Weber [1921] 1968, 971–73). In this category, Weber also includes higher education, since the corporate economy and the state have come to rely upon bureaucracies for basic research and the training of a specialized workforce (983, 998–1002).
The bureaucratic state is absolutely essential for large-scale capitalism to exist: the two have co-evolved in the West and continue to do so to the present day. The two sectors—public and private bureaucracies—feed off each other. Political scientists Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson (2010, 55) describe this autocatalytic relationship:

As the great political economist Karl Polanyi famously argued in the 1940s, even the ostensibly freest markets require the extensive exercise of the coercive power of the state—to enforce contracts, to govern the formation of unions, to spell out the rights and obligations of corporations, to shape who has standing to bring legal actions, to define what constitutes an unacceptable conflict of interest, and so on. The libertarian vision of a night-watchman state gently policing an unfettered free market is a philosophical conceit, not a description of reality.

The intertwining of government and markets is nothing new. The frontier was settled because government granted land to the pioneers, killed, drove off, or rounded up Native Americans, created private monopolies to forge a nationwide transportation and industrial network, and linked the land settled with the world’s largest postal system. Similarly, the laissez-faire capitalism of the early twentieth century was underpinned by a government that kept unions at bay, created a stable money supply, erected trade barriers that sheltered the new manufacturing giants, protected entrepreneurs from debtors’ prison and corporations from liability, and generally made business the business of government.

Governments, then, not only shape and regulate markets; they also promote the growth of the economy, which provides more tax money that can be used for government social services, technological infrastructure expansion, and military defence. As government spending flows to the private sector, corporate growth creates interest groups—managers, workers, stockholders—that then lobby governments for further spending in their areas of interest (defence, military adventure, energy, construction), contribute to
the campaigns of those office seekers who are favourable to their interests, and purchase issue advocacy ads (or whole radio and television networks) to propagandize for issues and candidates who are favourable to their interests.

The system of capitalism itself is one of the primary carriers of bureaucracy, with large capitalist enterprises the closest thing to ideal bureaucracies in the real world. The more complex the production and distribution of goods, the more necessary corporate bureaucracy becomes. Bureaucratic management is needed to assure coordination, precision, speed, and the continuous performance of duties in far-flung operations. Consider the factory floor, as described by Weber ([1921] 1968, 1156):

No special proof is necessary to show that military discipline is the ideal model for the modern capitalist factory, as it was for the ancient plantation. However, organizational discipline in the factory has a completely rational basis. With the help of suitable methods of measurement, the optimum profitability of the individual worker is calculated like that of any material means of production. On this basis, the American system of “scientific management” triumphantly proceeds with its rational conditioning and training of work performances, thus drawing the ultimate conclusions from the mechanization and discipline of the plant. The psycho-physical apparatus of man is completely adjusted to the demands of the outer world, the tools, the machines—in short, it is functionalized, and the individual is shorn of his natural rhythm as determined by his organism; in line with the demands of the work and procedure, he is attuned to a new rhythm through the functional specialization of muscles and through the creation of an optimal economy of physical effort.

Such discipline, coordination, and focus on efficiency are equally true of corporate management as a whole. Capitalism is organized around the goal of maximizing profit by eliminating considerations of traditions, emotions, and other irrational factors that may detract
from the bottom line (Weber [1921] 1968, 973–74). Because the bottom line is simple and unambiguous, because the whole corporate structure is focused upon this single goal, capitalism is unparalleled in its bureaucratic organization.

Other factors behind the growth of bureaucracy include the need for domestic security and social welfare policies, all of which require intensive administration (971–73, 998–1001). Government bureaucracy has grown to provide social services for the masses, collect taxes, redistribute income, administer law and medical care (at least in most modern societies), and a host of other activities. “The decisive reason for the advance of bureaucratic organization,” writes Weber, “has always been its purely technical superiority over any other form of organization. The fully developed bureaucratic mechanism compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production” (973). Bureaucracy grows because it works; no other form of human organization can match its efficiency in attaining whatever goal that is set for it.

One of the primary carriers of bureaucracy, Weber claims, is mass democracy. This is because democracy fosters equality over privilege, the treatment of all on the basis of the rule of law rather than through special treatment or favouritism. To fully understand Weber, though, it must be pointed out that he does not equate “mass democracy” with people actually governing their society. Rather, he means societies in which leaders are selected from competing social circles—say, liberal or conservative parties—who are then able to exert some limited influence upon the bureaucracies of government based on public opinion ([1921] 1968, 984–85). Weber asserts that the bureaucracies, not the people, rule in mass democracies. Therefore, while democracy is as opposed to the “rule” of bureaucracy as it is to the rule of other elites, it finds bureaucracy indispensable in setting up systems of justice, elections, economic regulating agencies, and a host of other governmental activities intended to promote equality.

Weber reserves a special place for the role of communication and transportation technology in the bureaucratization process, calling such technologies “pacemakers” of the process.
transportation systems—canals, railroads, highways, postal systems, and telegraph and telephone lines, for example—can only be efficiently constructed and maintained through public bureaucracies, and in this respect, they play the same role as the monolithic works in ancient societies. But such communication and transportation systems are also the means of bureaucratic administration and control; the large modern state can only be administered because these systems exist (973).

Yet another reason for the growth of bureaucracies in the modern era is the internal dynamics of bureaucratic organization. Bureaucracies are rarely stable structures; bureaucrats are always in the process of refining their procedures and expanding the reach of the organization. Some of this expansion is due to their individual motivation: corporate managers—anxious for promotion, higher salaries, and other rewards—constantly search for new markets and products to grow the bottom line of the corporation. Government bureaucrats look for promotion or, jealously guarding their authority, look for ways to expand it. And all bureaucrats believe that their particular bureau is the most important within the organization, the key to its continued growth and prosperity, and therefore should be given more resources and expanded accordingly.

Structural characteristics of modern sociocultural systems also promote the growth of bureaucracy, including one focused on by Durkheim and his followers: the decline of primary groups. Kinship networks, communities, churches, neighbourhoods, and even the nuclear family are increasingly losing many of the functions they used to provide individuals in informal networks. Robert Nisbet (1975) and others attribute this decline in primary group functions to the expansion of government services. Government services and transfer payments, they argue, have squeezed out the informal networks that provided these services in the past through kinship, community, and religious ties. Still others attribute the decline of primary groups to the growth of the division of labour and the necessity to move, physically and/or socially, as one pursues job opportunities, thus breaking the ties of family and community (Elwell 1999, 99). It is probable
that both forces are at play, but whatever caused the erosion of primary groups, government and corporate entities, both of which are bureaucratically organized, quickly expanded to fill the vacuum left by the decline. As we will see in chapter 8, the loss of important functions of family and community and other primary groups has consequences for the individual as well.

Another structural characteristic that promotes the growth of bureaucracy is what I call the organizational imperative. In order to deal on a more equal footing with corporate or government bureaucracy, for example, workers form labour unions, which soon become organized along similar bureaucratic lines. To counteract corporate interests, consumers organize interest groups to bring pressure to bear on legislators and regulators. Other groups—involving both individual and corporate “citizens”—organize to lobby state and national regulatory agencies, school boards, zoning commissions, and legislators on behalf of their interests. Weber, of course, anticipated this phenomenon: “When those subject to bureaucratic control seek to escape the influence of existing bureaucratic apparatus, this is normally possible only by creating an organization of their own which is equally subject to the process of bureaucratization” ([1921] 1968, 224). Bureaucracy is a human machine; it is the most efficient way to organize human beings in attaining a goal—whatever that goal might be. It is superior to all other forms of human organization in terms of the scope of operations that can be placed under its command, adaptability to task, and predictability of results. Bureaucracy is an efficient organizational form for any group that wants to attain a goal.

A final characteristic of the sociocultural system that promotes bureaucratization is the rationalization process itself. Rationalization is Weber’s term for the increasing dominance of goal-oriented rational behaviour in modern social life. Weber believed that, prior to the modern period, humans were motivated in their behaviour by a combination of values, traditions, emotions, and goal-oriented rationality. But the increasing dominance of bureaucracy—particularly in Western cultures—has promoted goal-oriented behaviour and discouraged and denigrated actions based on emotions, human values,
or traditions. Rationality is the only approved basis of bureaucratic decision making; government and corporate bureaucracies are structured to use a rational calculus in pursuit of their goals. Over time, rationality has increasingly come to dominate our personal thinking as well. We live, work, play, and participate politically in a rationalized society; rationalization has formed the way we view, value, and act upon the world. Institutions and practices that fail to live up to standards of efficiency, calculability, and predictability are subject to rational reform. In the long run, this brings much of social life under the purview of bureaucracy.

**DYSFUNCTIONS OF BUREAUCRACY**

The dysfunctions of bureaucracy have been written about extensively by both micro- and macrosociologists. Microsociologists, of course, focus upon the impact of bureaucracy on the individual. Much like an assembly line, the division of labour within large bureaucracies demands a highly specialized workforce whose members have little identification with the overall goals of the organization or their role in it. Their actions and decisions in the workplace are controlled by the rules and regulations of the bureaucracy rather than being self-directed. Such work environments create high levels of alienation and psychological pain. People in such situations often work for the money rather than for any intrinsic job satisfaction; they work to live rather than live to work, going through the motions of work in order to sustain themselves and their families but investing their energies in entertainment, leisure, and family.

Another widely commented-upon example of the impact of bureaucracy on the individual is the concept of the “bureaucratic personality,” as described by Robert Merton ([1948] 1968, 249–59). Because the bureaucracy puts so much stress on rules and procedures, following the rules can become an end in itself for the bureaucrat, even when the rules get in the way of achieving the goals of the organization. The bureaucrat becomes obsessed with form, unable
to make decisions or exceptions when the situation falls outside of standard categories. One example is the following of a zero-tolerance drug policy in our high schools to such a degree that students are periodically expelled for carrying aspirin or nasal decongestants. As in this example, the bureaucratic personality is often dysfunctional not only for the individual bureaucrat but also for the clients he or she serves, and sometimes even for the organization itself. Another source of dysfunction is bureaucracy’s demand for impersonal treatment of both its workers and its clients. While this requirement is meant to assure that people are treated fairly and equitably without prejudice or favour, it can be maddening to those who resent being treated like a number or a category. In the following section, though, we will examine the two major macro dysfunctions of bureaucracy: the problem of oligarchy and what I call the “irrationality factor”—the unavoidable “conflict between formal and substantive rationality of the sort which sociology so often encounters” (Weber [1921] 1968, 225).

**THE PROBLEM OF OLIGARCHY**

In 1915, Robert Michels, a sociologist and friend of Max Weber, formulated the “iron law of oligarchy.” According to this iron law, “It is organization which gives birth to the dominion of the elected over the electors . . . of the delegates over the delegators. Who says organization, says oligarchy” (365). Michels coined this “iron law” after experiencing it first-hand as a member of Germany’s Social Democratic Party. He was struck by the fact that although the party espoused a democratic ideology, it was dominated by a few leaders at the top who formed a leadership clique. Michels found that oligarchy stems primarily from the necessity of leadership in all social organizations. Any large-scale organization is faced with problems that can only be solved by creating a bureaucracy, and by design, a bureaucracy is hierarchically organized with enormous power vested in higher offices. To maintain impersonality and efficiency, lower offices are severely constrained in their authority; they are restricted to interpreting rules
and precedents. The efficient functioning of an organization therefore requires the concentration of real power and authority in the hands of a very few people. The problem of oligarchy—a small class of rulers exercising immense authority within the organization—exists within any bureaucracy, whatever its ideology. Within bureaucratic organization, it is codified in its written rules and procedures.

These organizational characteristics of bureaucracy are reinforced by certain characteristics of upper-level bureaucrats. Leaders arise because of their personal qualities of competence and charisma, but they soon become focused not primarily on the organization’s goal but on their own interests and authority. People achieve leadership positions within bureaucracies because they have unusual political skills; they are very good at getting their way and at persuading others to agree with their suggestions. Once they attain high office, their power and prestige is significantly enhanced by the authority of the position. As information flows up from all lower offices under their purview, they have access and control over information not available to the lower offices; they control what information flows down the channels of communication. Bureaucrats at all levels are strongly motivated to maintain their positions by continually demonstrating to those above and below them in the hierarchy of the correctness of their decisions and the effectiveness of their leadership. Upper offices within the bureaucracy also have control over very powerful positive sanctions to promote desirable behaviour of those under their authority as well as negative sanctions to discourage behaviour they find harmful to their interests. To summarize with a colourful phrase, bureaucracy teaches the office holder to “kiss up and kick down.” In varying degrees according to their position in the hierarchy, bureaucrats have the power to grant or deny raises, assign workloads, and fire, promote, or demote their underlings. Junior officials who share the opinions and attitudes of those in authority tend to be the ones who excel in such organizations; thus, the oligarchy becomes self-perpetuating.7

The oligarchy within bureaucracy is also reinforced by certain human characteristics. Stanley Milgram (1974, 123–24) argues that
human beings are hierarchical animals and that organization based on dominance is a key survival strategy in humans.

The formation of hierarchically organized groupings lends enormous advantage to those so organized in coping with dangers of the physical environment, threats posed by competing species, and potential disruption from within. . . . An evolutionary bias is implied in this viewpoint; behavior, like any other of man’s characteristics, has through successive generations been shaped by requirements of survival. Behaviors that did not enhance the chances of survival were successively bred out of the organism because they led to the eventual extinction of the group that displayed them.

Therefore, Milgram argues, we are born with a potential for obedience that interacts with social forces to produce the hierarchies that dominate modern societies. What are these social forces? First, the child grows up in the midst of structures of authority within the family and is subjected to parental regulation that results in the internalization of respect and obedience to authority. While children of all societies are socialized in such family structures, modern societies add the requirement that children submit to the impersonal authority of bureaucratic organization in school. Here, the child learns how to function within a structure of bureaucratic authority subject to the rules and demands of teachers and administrators, a structure in which obedience is rewarded and disobedience is severely punished. Upon graduation, the socialization process continues in college, military service, or the workforce. Workers learn on the job that “although some discreetly expressed dissent is allowable, an underlying posture of submission is required for harmonious functioning with superiors. However much freedom of detail is allowed the individual, the situation is defined as one in which he is to do a job prescribed by someone else” (137). The individual thus learns at a very early age to submit to impersonal authority and is continually confronted with positive and negative sanctions in which obedience is rewarded and failure to obey is punished. This is facilitated by the
respect and gratitude that followers give to leaders and by the general passivity of the masses (Michels 1915, 364–65). By design, the rank and file do not have access to all of the information that is available to upper offices. This lack of access is often used by those who are higher in the hierarchy to stifle debate or to imply that because of their superior positions, they know better.

A final factor in promoting oligarchy, and one that has been intensifying in the past several centuries, is the role of technology. In the past, the size, scope, and centralization of decision making within an organization were limited by the transportation and communication technologies of the time. For effective and efficient coordination and control, upper bureaucratic offices must receive information about day-to-day operations in order to make critical decisions. In addition, these offices must be able to efficiently bring resources to bear when called for. Modern communication and transportation innovations are fundamental in that they have allowed corporate and government bureaucracies to enlarge their scope and centralize their operations far beyond their traditional bureaucratic counterparts. Recent innovations in computer technologies, including increasingly sophisticated software, have given bureaucracies the tools to more effectively centralize, coordinate, and control their internal operations and thus more efficiently achieve their institutional goals.

But the concern about oligarchical tendencies within organizations is dwarfed by concerns about the same tendency in the sociocultural system as a whole. By its nature, bureaucracy generates an enormous degree of economic, political, and social power. Because of its technical superiority over other forms of organization, bureaucracies have proliferated in modern society and greatly enlarged their scope and authority. In a society dominated by large formal organizations, economic, political, and social power become concentrated in the hands of the few people at the top of these organizations. The iron law thus represents a conundrum: democracy is simply not conceivable in large societies without bureaucratic organization to organize and coordinate the various branches of government and to provide for defence, elections, criminal and civil justice, economic
Bureaucratization 141

regulation, taxation, education, and welfare. Yet this bureaucracy is the very antithesis of democracy itself. The problem of society-wide oligarchy is compounded by the existence of corporate bureaucracies within nation-states. Like the modern state, capitalism is simply not conceivable on a large scale without bureaucratic organization to organize and coordinate all its necessary functions, often on a worldwide basis. Yet the growth of corporate bureaucracy has created enormous concentrations of wealth and power that form intimate ties with governments and thereby threaten representative democracy.

Coincidental with the centralization of power is its enlargement in the modern world. Leaders within government and corporate bureaucracies have instruments that allow them to have unparalleled influence on the masses. Firms specializing in advertising, public relations, and political propaganda have taken sociological and psychological principles (and, in the process, have co-opted many sociologists and psychologists) and applied them to the manipulation of people. Through such mass media technology as print, radio, television, and the Internet, bureaucracies now have direct access into our homes, schools, offices, factories—into our very lives. Corporate, political, and government bureaucracies use this access to sell us goods and service, political candidates and opinions, entertainment and ideologies. These technological developments significantly strengthen the scope and authority of centralized elites and make their decisions more consequential than ever before.

In the tradition of Weber, C. Wright Mills wrote of increasing elite domination of American society in the 1950s. The power of these elites, according to Mills, was based on the bureaucracies that they controlled. Mills believed that the elite share an outlook and ideology that is partly based on their common social class background, a background that gives them access to the right social circles, wealth, exclusive schools, and private clubs, and provides coordination to their actions. While a significant portion of American leaders have come from the upper classes (the Kennedys, Bushes, and Rockefellers, for example), many have come from more humble beginnings (Reagan, Clinton, and Obama). But Mills did not believe
that the coordination of elites is entirely based upon common social class background; rather, he stressed the mutual self-interests of corporate and government institutions as well as their increasing structural integration:

As each of these domains becomes enlarged and centralized, the consequences of its activities become greater, and its traffic with the others increases. The decisions of the military establishment rest upon and grievously affect political life as well as the very level of economic activity. The decisions made within the political domain determine economic activities and military programs. There is no longer, on the one hand, an economy, and, on the other hand, a political order containing a military establishment unimportant to the politics and to money-making. There is a political economy linked, in a thousand ways, with military institutions and decisions. . . . There is an ever-increasing interlocking of economic, military, and political structures. If there is government intervention in the corporate economy, so is there corporate intervention in the governmental process. In the structural sense, this triangle of power is the source of the interlocking directorate that is most important for the historical structure of the present. ([1956] 1970, 7–8)

According to Mills, these elites increasingly rule American society, filling “the strategic command posts of the social structure, in which are now centered the effective means of power and wealth and celebrity which they enjoy” (4). Mills divides societal bureaucracies into three broad categories: corporate, government, and military. Many have questioned Mills’s inclusion of the military in his elite since this group is constitutionally under civilian-government control. But Mills can perhaps be forgiven for this as he was, after all, writing in the 1950s, when General Eisenhower was president, the country was just coming out of World War II, and the Cold War with the Soviet Union was intensifying. Mills’s Causes of World War Three (1958) emphasizes the militarism of American elites more than a military elite that directly dominated sociocultural systems.9
Aside from Mills, several contemporary macrosociologists have commented upon the increasing militarism of American society. For example, Robert Nisbet, a sociologist from the other side of the political spectrum, claims that a military cast of mind increasingly dominates American institutions.\textsuperscript{10} As evidence for this rise of militarism, he points to the increased size of the military as well as the increasing incidence and intensity of war in the twentieth century (1975, 147–48). The associated spending is, of course, in the interests of the elites. Corporations profit greatly from government spending on the military, not only in the manufacturing of weapons and supplies but also increasingly in support services to the military on the base and in the field; political representatives and their districts benefit from military bases and defence contracts; and universities, private corporations, and think tanks benefit from military research.

The extent of elite power—whether absolute power or only undue influence—is an empirical question whose answer varies across societies and through time. However, all societies have elites, and the foundation of elite power in modern societies is based on corporate and government bureaucratic structures. According to Mills, these bureaucratic structures are enlarging and are subjecting more and more of social life to their authority. Furthermore, authority structures within these bureaucracies are becoming more centralized and have access to more technologically sophisticated levers of power and manipulation. Thus, the decisions of a few elites in modern societies are becoming increasingly consequential.

Thomas Dye provides significant evidence of the growing enlargement and centralization of corporate bureaucracies in the United States. Beginning in 1976, Dye wrote a series of books (one every four years or so) that attempt to empirically gauge the concentration of power in American society and that document the astounding growth and centralization of American bureaucracies. “Economic power in America is highly concentrated,” he writes. “Indeed, only about 4,300 individuals—two one-thousandths of 1 percent of the population—exercise formal authority over more than one half of the nation’s industrial assets, two thirds of all banking assets, one
half of all assets in communication and utilities, and more than two thirds of all insurance assets. . . . The reason for this concentration of power in the hands of so few people is found in the concentration of industrial and financial assets in a small number of giant corporations” (2000, 15). For example, of the more than five million corporations that file US tax returns each year, the largest five hundred take in about 60 percent of all corporate revenues, or over $7 trillion (2002, 13–14). “In brief, the central feature of the American and world economy is the concentration of resources in relatively few large corporations. . . . In recent years concentration has continued to increase, although at a slower rate than earlier in the twentieth century. It is clear that society is not going to return to the small, romanticized, perhaps mythical world of individual enterprise” (Dye 2000, 23). This growing enlargement and concentration of economic power in the United States and in the world is a fact of life.

And what is this growing concentration of economic power used for? Private corporations use their economic power to dominate markets so as to limit competition and maximize profit. A further benefit of economic power is that it can be converted into political and social power and used to shape the marketplace in a way that advances the corporation’s interests. Through donations to political campaigns, investments in lobbying, sponsorship of the radio and television shows of political pundits, support for think tanks and “grassroots” movements favourable to their interests (so widespread today that it is called “astroturfing”),11 outright purchase of television networks, and now the unlimited purchase of anonymous advocacy ads, corporations seek to influence the policies of nation-states. Always with an eye to maximizing profit, they seek to influence (1) government environmental, safety, and financial regulations to benefit corporate interests; (2) tax policy to benefit corporations, managers, and stockholders; (3) the granting of government contracts; (4) foreign policy (especially trade and military) that is favourable to corporate interests; (5) elections to ensure that politicians favorable to their interests are elected and corporate friendly judges are appointed; and (6) public opinion in order to promote corporate influence in the political process.
Governments throughout the world have also been growing in size and scope in the modern era. In the twenty-first century, the list of all government functions, services, and responsibilities is a long one. Examples include protection of property and individual liberty; defence and military offence; taxation; social security for the aged; unemployment; regulation of health care; education (all levels); military, medical, industrial, and scientific research; mail delivery; job training; parks and recreation; creation and maintenance of infrastructure; regulation of business and finance—the list goes on. In the opening years of the twenty-first century, the various levels of government in the United States account for about 35 percent of the gross national product, with the federal government alone accounting for 23 percent (Dye 2000, 57–58). Real power, according to Dye, is even more concentrated in the US government than it is in the corporations; in the three branches of the federal government, the power is concentrated in only a handful of positions.

Politicians and government officials, of course, often have their own goals: winning the next election, promoting their ideology or values, personal financial security, and, perhaps, securing their place in history. The modern state is not a mere tool of corporations; the oligarchy is not a conscious, conspiratorial phenomenon, nor does it depend upon common class background, interlocking directorates, revolving doors between corporations and governments, or other forms of explicit coordination, though all of these methods of explicit coordination are useful in advancing elite interests. Rather, because the dominant economic institutions in modern societies are private corporations, the nation-state must follow corporate priorities, as political scientist Michael Harrington (1976, 307) emphasizes: “The welfare-state government is not itself the initiator of most production within the economy. The corporations do that. However, that same government is increasingly charged with arranging the preconditions for profitable production. Its funds, its power, its political survival depend on private sector performance. So do the jobs of most workers. The state’s interest in perpetuating its own rule is thus, in economic fact, identified with the health of the capitalist economy.”
There is, in fact, a structured bias of government and corporate elites toward one another’s interests, a political economy in which the decisions of government and the corporate elite come together in consensus to achieve their goals. John Kenneth Galbraith ([1967] 1972, 316) states these goals succinctly:

The state is strongly concerned with the stability of the economy. And with its expansion and growth. And with education. And with technical and scientific advance. And, most notably, with the national defense. These are the national goals; they are sufficiently trite so that one has a reassuring sense of the obvious in articulating them. All have their counterpart in the needs and goals of the techno-structure. It requires stability for its planning. Growth brings promotion and prestige. It requires trained manpower. It needs government underwriting of research and development. Military and other technical procurement support its most developed form of planning. At each point the government has goals with which the techno-structure can identify itself.

These goals may seem “trite” and “obvious,” but that is precisely what one would expect as the elites’ goals become the nation’s goals. They are the default positions for American politics, the background to all political debate. Weber himself ([1904] 1930, 16) summed up the extent of bureaucratic domination concisely: “The most important functions of the everyday life of society have come to be in the hands of technically, commercially, and above all legally trained government officials.”

THE IRRATIONALITY FACTOR: TECHNOCRATIC THINKING WITHOUT CRITICAL THINKING

In his writing, Weber distinguishes between Zweckrational, or “formal rationality,” and Wertrational, or “substantive rationality.” “Formal rationality” refers to simple means-ends calculations. You have a goal,
and you take rational steps—steps based on past experience, observation, logic, or science—to attain that goal. The concept of “substantive rationality” refers to goal-oriented rational action pursued within the context of ultimate ends or values. (The German noun Wert means “value” or “worth,” whereas Zweck means “purpose” or “aim.”) The term Wertrational “is full of ambiguities,” notes Weber ([1921] 1968, 85–86). “It conveys only one element common to all ‘substantive’ analyses: namely, that they do not restrict themselves to note the purely formal and (relatively) unambiguous fact that an action is based on ‘goal-oriented’ rational calculation with the technically most adequate available methods, but apply certain criteria of ultimate ends, whether they be ethical, political, utilitarian, hedonistic, feudal (ständisch), egalitarian, or whatever, and measure the results of the economic action, however formally ‘rational’ in the sense of correct calculation they may be against these scales of ‘value rationality’ or ‘substantive goal rationality.’” Substantive rationality is holistic thinking focused upon problem solving within a system of values, as opposed to the specialized, technical thinking that dominates the age. Bureaucratic organizations, whether of the corporate or the government variety, are largely based on formal rationality, their hierarchically ranked offices filled by officers of narrow specialty and authority guided in their decision making and actions by rules and precedent.

The terminology that Weber used to describe the rationalization process does not translate smoothly into English. What Weber means by rationalization is often confused with the term’s more familiar meaning of providing superficially plausible reasons or excuses for your behaviour that serve to cover up the real causes. The German term Zweckrational, or goal-oriented rational behaviour based on observation and logic, does not have a good English equivalent. The same goes for Wertrational, or goal-oriented rational action in relation to values or ultimate ends. Weber also used the somewhat simpler terms “formal” and “substantive” rationality to get at the same contrast in modes of thought.

In translating Zweckrational and Wertrational, some sociologists (including myself) adopt Weber’s distinction between “formal” and
“substantive” rationality. C. Wright Mills tried a different course. Ignoring Weber’s German terminology, Mills (1959) makes a simple distinction between rationality and reason. He explains that when participating in bureaucratic organizations, individuals lose their ability to control their own actions and are forced to submit to the rational rules of the organization. They are therefore guided not by their conscious reason—with all its attendant human emotions, social traditions, and conflicting values—but rather by the prescribed rationalized rules and procedures of the organization itself. “In the extreme development,” writes Mills, “the chance to reason of most men is destroyed, as rationality increases and its locus, its control, is moved from the individual to the big-scale organization. There is then rationality without reason. Such rationality is not commensurate with freedom but the destroyer of it” (170). While the effort to find a relatively simple way to transpose Weber’s ideas into English seems valuable to me, I do not find Mills’s distinction between rationality and reason especially helpful. There is, I think, a better way to express Weber’s theory of the irrationality of rationalization in English.

Although the precision and punch of Weber’s rationalization theory often seems to be lost in translation, I suggest translating Zweckrational, or formal rationality, as technocratic thinking, and Wertrational, or substantive rationality, as critical thinking. According to Weber’s rationalization theory, then, modernity promotes the growing dominance of technocratic thinking at the expense of critical thinking. As bureaucracy increasingly characterizes modern society, it becomes the dominant motivating force—a mode of thought embedded in our social structure and, through our participation in that structure, in our very being. Furthermore, Weber maintains that even though a bureaucracy is highly rational in the formal sense of technical efficiency, it does not follow that it is also rational in the substantive sense of the moral acceptability of its goals or the means used to achieve them. Nor does an exclusive focus on the goals of the organization necessarily coincide with the broader goals of society as a whole. In fact, the single-minded pursuit of practical goals can actually undermine the foundations of the organization or even of
the social order. What is good for the bureaucracy in the short term is not always good for the society as a whole—and often, in the long term, it is not even good for the bureaucracy. As bureaucracy grows in power and scope within a society and the social world becomes ever more subject to formal rationality, the role of substantive rationality decreases in human affairs.

Higher education is fond of claiming that one of its major goals is teaching critical thinking. Critical thinking, though, is one of those qualities that, while you may know it when you see it, is difficult to put into words. I once attended a workshop on critical thinking for which a big-name philosophy professor from a prominent university was brought in. All faculty members were required to show up for the workshop. The professor offered several definitions of critical thinking, none of which I really understood. (He was a philosopher, after all). Finally, I asked him for an example of critical thinking, and this is what he told us: “A man out in California invented a tomato picker. The picker was designed to cut tomato vines, shake the tomatoes loose, spray-wash them, and place them on a conveyor belt, where the poorer quality tomatoes would be removed by hand; the conveyor belt would then drop them into a wagon. However, there was a problem: to clear the machine, the tomatoes had to withstand an impact of fifteen miles an hour when dropped into the wagon. They tried several adjustments to the machine but just could not solve the problem. Finally, a critical thinker came along with the solution: he developed a tomato that could withstand a fifteen-mile-an-hour impact.” Even at the time, I thought that this was a poor example. The professor’s anecdote seemed to me to be an example of problem solving, or what many would call “technocratic thinking,” rather than of critical thinking.

With a little research, I discovered that the perfecting of the tomato picker, more accurately called a “tomato harvester,” involved a series of problem-solving steps—what I would call “technocratic thinking.” In fact, the mechanical harvester was the result of work by “a team made up of an engineering group and a horticultural group,” who “with advice and assistance from agronomists and irrigation
specialists developed suitable plants and an efficient harvester at the same time” (Rasmussen 1968, 532–33). First, to accommodate the mechanical harvester, the technologists had to develop a tomato that not only could withstand a fifteen-mile-an-hour impact but also was resistant to bruising. Second, although traditional fields were harvested by hand several times as the tomatoes ripened, when harvested mechanically, all the tomatoes in the field had to ripen at about the same time because the machine cut the vines below the ground and killed the plant. Third, the technologists had to develop a variety that could easily be shaken loose. And finally, for tomatoes that were to be eaten fresh rather than used for canning or sauces, there were additional problems. Because they were to be shipped all over the country from California, they had to be picked green and then gassed in the packing plant so that they would turn red during shipping.

All this problem solving had a large ripple effect, creating major problems for both traditional tomato producers and consumers. Because mechanical harvesters replaced a lot of manual labour, thousands lost their jobs. Because the machine required large fields and economies of scale (a mechanical tomato harvester is a huge investment), many growers had to sell out or go under. Finally, because California could now supply fresh tomatoes year-round for millions of people, the growers entered into long-term contracts with grocery stores throughout the country, thus creating national producers and closing markets for local producers who could supply tomatoes only in season. In other words, problem solving without considering the larger context led to the production of year-round tomatoes, which caused extreme hardship for a large number of farmers and workers, destroyed many local markets, and sacrificed the tenderness and taste of the tomato itself. Other than that, it has been a complete success.12

While problem solving is invaluable, when it is not done in a context of values, traditions, and emotions, it can have unintended negative effects. Critical thinking, unlike technocratic thinking, attempts to analyze situations and solve problems within the context of the
whole system. Critical thinking is not something parents, educators, or religious leaders can teach directly; it has to be modelled, encouraged, and developed over time and with experience. However, since critical thinking is not conducive to the smooth operation of bureaucracies, it is not widespread in hyperindustrial societies.

Wendell Berry (1977) illustrates how the pursuit of technocratic rationality can often undermine the very goals of the bureaucracy itself. Agriculture, Berry writes, has become an extractive industry in which values of productivity and profit have replaced maintenance and care for the land and animals. Farms have progressively become rationalized operations throughout the twentieth century. In crop production, this rationalization includes a high degree of specialization of farms to the production of a single crop; the use of oversized and ever more specialized mechanical equipment that tills, sows, irrigates, and harvests thousands of acres of land; the application of chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, and fungicides to increase productivity; the use of large amounts of water for irrigation; and the scientific manipulation of seeds for resistance against disease and pests and for attributes that will increase yield as well as the profits of the seed companies. For example, “terminator seeds” have been genetically altered so as to grow plants that produce sterile seeds, thus preventing farmers from growing their own “seed grain.” This technology was developed by multinational agribusiness companies such as Monsanto on the basis of research that was often funded by the US government. The marketing and widespread use of terminator seeds worldwide is making farmers increasingly dependent upon agribusiness.

Over the past thirty or forty years, rationalization of agriculture has been extended into the area of animal husbandry. Animals are specially bred for desirable characteristics such as rapid maturity, heavy weight and large breasts on turkeys and chickens, or resistance to disease and pests. These animals are raised in large CAFOS—Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations—in poultry barns, intensive hog operations, and cattle feedlots. The process is aided by mechanized feeding and waste removal and by the liberal
administration of drugs to prevent the spread of disease. Further rationalization of agricultural practices can be expected as genetic engineering continues to advance.

This rationalization of agriculture has been done at the expense of farm families and their communities, as well as the wider society. Based on huge amounts of capital for machinery, land, chemicals, seeds, and fuel, industrial agriculture promotes the growing concentration of farmland in order to achieve economies of scale. As a result, those working the land have become a tiny percentage of the population of industrial societies, and many small towns that once served the surrounding farming community have become ghost towns. The driving force behind this concentration has not been the individual farmer but rather the collaboration of agribusinesses, government bureaucrats, and agricultural scientists. Those who have benefited from maximum productivity of the farm include manufacturers, oil producers, seed distributors, chemical companies, food processors, academic careerists, and bureaucrats.

It is the agricultural universities that perhaps best illustrate how the irrationality factor—the conflict between technocratic thinking and critical thinking—can sometimes undermine the very purpose of the organization itself. Wendell Berry (1977, 155) points out that the Morrill Land-Grant College Act was specifically created to assist the farmer: “The land-grant acts gave to the colleges not just government funds and a commission to teach and do research, but also a purpose which may be generally stated as the preservation of agriculture and rural life.” However, university agriculture departments single-mindedly pursued the goal of increased productivity above all else. In doing so, these institutions actually destroyed the very clients whom they were created to help.

Capitalism, particularly in the age of scarce resources and high unemployment, is the epitome of formal rationality or technocratic thinking. A capitalist enterprise’s entire reason for being is to maximize profit. To achieve this, its owners seek to constantly improve, through technological development, the productivity of the labour they employ. Economist Harry Braverman ([1974] 1998, 142)
describes the process: “The drive for increased productivity inheres in each capitalist firm by virtue of its purpose as an organization for the expansion of capital; it is moreover enforced upon laggards by the threats of national and international competition. In this setting, the development of technology takes the form of a headlong rush in which social effects are largely disregarded, priorities are set only by the criteria of profitability, and the equitable spread, reasonable assimilation, and selective appropriation of the fruits of science, considered from the social point of view, remain the visions of helpless idealists.” Thus, we have the mechanical tomato harvester and countless other agricultural innovations that have destroyed the family farm. We also have manufacturing companies that automate, deskill workers, or simply move jobs offshore in order to exploit their workforce more efficiently. All are examples of irrationality brought on by the pursuit of profit above all else.

By established law, the corporation is a legally defined institution whose purpose is to pursue profit for its shareholders. The corporation separates ownership from management, thus opening the door to industrial growth and abuse. “The genius of the corporation as a business form, and the reason for its remarkable rise over the last three centuries,” explains law professor Joel Bakan (2004, 6), “was—and is—its capacity to combine the capital and thus the economic power, of unlimited numbers of people. Joint-stock companies emerged in the sixteenth century, by which time it was clear that partnerships, limited to drawing capital from the relatively few people who could practicably run a business together, were inadequate for financing the new, though still rare, large-scale enterprises of nascent industrialization.” From its beginnings in sixteenth-century England, the corporate form evolved in scope and power. By the middle of the nineteenth century, stockholders were granted “limited liability” in England and the United States, meaning that their liability for corporate debts was limited to the amount they had invested in the company (11). By the end of that century, the US Supreme Court ruled that corporations were “persons,” entitled to the due process and equal protection of the laws of the United States (16). In the early twentieth century, the
courts established that “managers and directors have a legal duty to put shareholders’ interest above all others and no legal authority to serve any other interest—what has come to be known as ‘the best interests of the corporations’ principle” (36). Thus, the profit motive was legally enshrined as the primary goal of all corporate action. While managers and directors have some latitude for charitable and socially responsible action, all such actions must be connected with and subordinate to the bottom line of the corporation.

Government bureaucracies, though perhaps in not quite so single-minded fashion, are similarly structured. Educational bureaucracies, for example, in their attempts to balance budgets and meet calculable measures of credit-hour production, persistence, and graduation rates lower academic standards and sidestep traditions. Social service bureaucracies, in their attempts to balance their budgets and apply their eligibility rules, routinely deny services to those in need. National security agencies, mandated with providing security to the nation, routinely violate individual civil rights and privacy. These are examples of what I call the irrationality factor, a concept that we will expand in the chapters ahead.

As Weber ([1921] 1968, 980) points out, both capital and state are bureaucratically organized: “The bureaucratic structure goes hand in hand with the concentration of the material means of management in the hands of the master. This concentration occurs, for instance, in a well-known and typical fashion in the development of big capitalist enterprises, which find their essential characteristics in this process. A corresponding process occurs in public organizations.” But despite this similarity in bureaucratic organization, capital and state have unique environments, characteristics, and goals. We will now examine the role of capital in modern society; this is followed by a similar exploration of the state. In the discussions that follow, however, we must always keep in mind that capital and state are inextricably intertwined and that thus combined, they confront the individual with overwhelming force.