Rationalization

The practical, divorced from the disciplines of value, tends to be defined by the immediate interests of the practitioner, and so becomes destructive of value, practical and otherwise. — WENDELL BERRY

This chapter addresses the third set of questions asked by C. Wright Mills (1959, 6–7) and cited in the opening chapter: “What varieties of men and women now prevail in this society and in this period? And what varieties are coming to prevail? In what ways are they selected and formed, liberated and repressed, made sensitive and blunted? What kinds of ‘human nature’ are revealed in the conduct and character we observe in this society in this period? And what is the meaning for ‘human nature’ of each and every feature of the society we are examining.” What are the impacts on human values, character, or “human nature” of the material, structural, and evolutionary forces we have identified—growing population, ever more detailed division of labour, intensifying technology, bureaucratization, capitalism, government growth, militarism, and decline in the functional importance of primary groups?
In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Émile Durkheim provides an answer. As a society grows in population and its production processes become necessarily more complex, individuals play more specialized roles and become increasingly dissimilar in their social experiences, material interests, values, and beliefs. Individuals within such a sociocultural system have less in common; however, they must become more dependent upon each other for their very survival. The growth of individualism is an inevitable result of the increasing division of labour, and this individualism can develop only at the expense of the common values, beliefs, and normative rules of society—the sentiments and beliefs that are held in common by all. With the loosening of these common rules and values, we also lose our sense of community or identity with the group. The social bond is thereby weakened, and social values and beliefs no longer provide us with coherent, consistent, or insistent moral guidance.

While this weakening of the social bond is a persistent theme of Durkheim, it is also expressed in the theories of other founders and of modern macro theorists. This chapter explores the congruence between Durkheim’s anomie, Marx’s alienation, and Weber’s rationalization of social life. All of these ideal phenomena are caused by changes in material and structural conditions—and all of them then interact with structural and material conditions by reinforcing or otherwise contributing to changes in these conditions.

Durkheim saw an increasing division of labour as being part of the evolutionary process, a process fueled primarily by an increase in population. As population grows and becomes denser, the division of labour intensifies, producing not only a greater quantity of goods and services but also a greater variety. Civilization itself, Durkheim maintains, is a consequence of these changes. Art, science, and economic activity all develop as a result. As our numbers increase, we can only maintain ourselves by greater specialization and harder work, and from this we develop a higher degree of culture. Civilization and economic advance is not a goal that we strive for, Durkheim ([1893] 1997, 336–37) insists; “It is not the pole towards which historic development is moving and to which men seek to get nearer in order to
be happier or better, for neither happiness nor morality necessarily increases with the intensity of life. They move because they must move, and what determines the speed of this march is the more or less strong pressure which they exercise upon one another, according to their numbers.” Following Durkheim, many sociologists posit that the increasing division of labour weakens the social bond between individuals within a society. In more primitive societies, the social bond is based on similarities between people. The division of labour is slight; there are some basic distinctions based on age and sex, but because nearly all participate in the common life of the society, experiences, interests, values, and norms are shared by all. With the continuing development of the division of labour, this traditional bond begins to weaken. The division of labour leads to different material interests, experiences, and, ultimately, values on the part of the individuals who make up a society.

Whether someone is a priest, an artisan, a merchant, or a peasant, the role is varied enough that the individual must perform a variety of mental and physical tasks to do his or her job. In modern times, the intensifying division of labour has led to more and more specialization in the professions, multiple layers and specialized offices in bureaucracy, and an ever more detailed division of labour in service, office, and production occupations. This has led to a narrowing of interests and values on the part of the population. Through the course of sociocultural evolution, the breakdown of tasks into ever more detailed parts has also led to stratification, unequal access to wealth and power, and, ultimately, decreased social cohesion and solidarity.

The division of labour takes place even in areas far removed from manufacturing or the provision of services. Wherever possible, jobs are continually broken up into ever simpler tasks, and machines are used to set the pace and, in the case of computers, to extend authority to a few individuals. The division of labour is one of the major characteristics of bureaucracy, and the growth of bureaucracy is very much part of the spread of the division of labour. Jobs and tasks that used to be performed by a single individual are now broken up in terms of
functions and parceled out to several. Even many executives and professionals are becoming less autonomous on the job and are permitted less initiative and control at work. Because of centralization, brought on by the thrust toward greater efficiency and the new technologies of communication and transportation, decision making increasingly becomes the application of bureaucratic rules. As detailed in chapter 5, many characteristics of the sociocultural system promote the growth of bureaucracies; the intensification of the infrastructure—population, production, and the division of labour—is simply the beginning. The spread of bureaucracy within the structure of society acts to reinforce the intensification process itself.

While the detailed division of labour is most advanced in the direct production of goods and services, bureaucratization applies the division of labour to the work of the “mind” as well: that is, to those tasks that initiate, organize, coordinate, and control the activities of people. It is this characteristic of the division of labour that has the most damaging effects on human beings. While it begins with the separation of the conception and execution of task between the factory worker and the manager of the office, it continues within the office itself. Unskilled and semi-skilled jobs continue to proliferate in hyperindustrial bureaucratic societies: labourers, clerical workers, and lower-level service and sales workers constitute well over half of all occupational categories today. Workers in such occupations have little control over the form or pace of work. Moreover, the compensation is meagre and the working conditions often poor.

But the division of labour does not stop there. As it increases, it reaches ever higher into the labour force, separating mind and body increasingly among professionals and bureaucrats. Autonomy is removed from many positions as decision making is reduced to the application of formal rules and procedures. In the process, mid-level executives and professionals become administrators of rules and procedures devised and revised further up the chain of command. “Accountability” has become the watchword in the middle levels of bureaucracy, whether in education, medicine, government, or the corporate world. Performance must be constantly monitored,
measured, and evaluated to make sure that institutional standards are maintained. Personal initiative and creativity is discouraged in the name of standardization, predictability, and efficiency. Administrators and executives become less autonomous, more subject to rules and supervision, and are thus permitted less latitude and initiative on the job. Complex tasks and procedures are broken down into discrete steps and parcelled out to lower-level functionaries guided by written rules of conduct. A similar process is occurring within the professions. Increasingly relying upon massive private and government bureaucracies for employment, modern professionals are being far more closely monitored than previously, with their decision making becoming more restricted and their expertise, the mere application of fixed rules.

**HUMAN NATURE**

Like many sociologists, I have a very plastic view of human nature. I find the incredible variety of human behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes virtually impossible to account for under any hard-and-fast, narrow conception of human nature. I cringe inwardly when a student tells me that all humans are naturally greedy and therefore capitalism is the only viable economic system possible. Hominid history covers some four million years; during that time, many offshoots of hominids have appeared, and all save *Homo sapiens* lived exclusively in hunting-and-gathering societies, which are widely noted for their social equality, sharing (generalized reciprocity), and simple material culture. Any account of the nature of human beings must take into account this long period of development in these simple societies.

*Homo sapiens*, the first modern humans, evolved as a distinct species some 200,000 years ago. Only in the past 12,000 years or so—the last 6 percent of the time that modern humans have been on this earth—have other types of societies (horticultural, pastoral, fishing, agrarian, industrial, and hyperindustrial) evolved. Industrial
society—with its massive technologies, use of fossil fuels, huge population, and detailed division of labour—is a recent innovation, at most two hundred years old, but two hundred years ago was only the beginning. It took considerable time (in human terms) to evolve to its present structure and strength, and it will continue to evolve in the future. Humans have also experienced a variety of different economic-political systems, from true communal sharing to total slavery for the masses with a tiny ruling class, from state socialism to state capitalism and everything in between. Modern humans have existed under a variety of material conditions; they thrive and multiply under a variety of social structures. Any conception of the nature of human beings must encompass their plasticity; it must allow significant latitude for sociocultural influence in forming individual character.

Durkheim had a conception of human nature that I believe has much merit. He considered humans to be “homo duplex,” or of two minds. The first, which he called “will,” was the id-like nature that each individual is born with. Centred on bodily needs and drives, it pushes the individual to act in ways to satisfy their needs, wants, and desires without consideration of the needs and desires of others. The unchecked will can be seen in infants, whose wants are centred on their bodily needs and desires. Left unchecked (or weakly checked) through a lifetime, the will leads to individuals using one another in their quest to satisfy the self; their desires are unlimited, and the constant seeking to slake these desires leads to unhappiness and despair.

The other part of human nature, which Durkheim calls the “collective conscience,” is social in origin. This collective conscience serves as a check on the will; it is a moral system made up of ethical codes, values, ideologies, and ideas. The collective conscience is formed through the socialization process by which the individual internalizes the codes, norms, and ethical values of the society. It is the collective conscience that disciplines the individual will, limiting the potentially unlimited desires and drives of the individual. However, according to Durkheim, the collective conscience cannot be instilled in the individual through rational means. True internalization of moral restraint can only be instilled through ties of love
and affection to the group: that is, through social bonds. Without these close primary-group bonds, the individual fails to fully internalize the moral codes of the society and the will is left unchecked. Lacking full integration into the norms and values of the group, the will is left free to engage in exploitive behaviour to satisfy the individual's desires at the expense of others. There is always a tension between our human appetites and our socially instilled moral life. In societies in which the collective conscience is weak—in which, in other words, there is a failure to fully integrate many individuals—exploitive behaviour becomes more common. In societies where integration is exceedingly strong, the individual's human senses and desires are constantly being denied.

Durkheim posits an evolutionary view of the collective conscience. As we have seen, he argues that simpler societies—ones dominated by kinship and community ties—were strongly integrated. In such societies, tasks are distributed primarily on the basis of gender and age group, and the division of labour remains relatively weak. Although, to some degree, specific duties differ—with men responsible for hunting, for example, and women for cooking and child care—for the most part the members of the society all engage in similar tasks, rituals, and daily activities: their life experiences do not radically diverge, nor do their fundamental attitudes and beliefs. Rules and norms, as embodied in rudimentary institutions and figures of authority, are universal; they are not subject to discussion and are generally obeyed without question. In these simple societies, mechanical solidarity—"the solidarity that derives from similarities" ([1893] 1997, 84)—prevails. Individual consciousness is so far overwhelmed by the collective conscience that little scope, or desire, exists for deviance or the exercise of personal will (228–29).

Durkheim believed that a complex division of labour weakens the collective conscience—the internalized beliefs and values of the society that restrain the will—by weakening the traditional institutions such as church, family, and community that serve to integrate the individual into the broader values of the group. As a society becomes more complex, individuals play more specialized roles and become
increasingly dissimilar in their social experiences, material interests, values, and beliefs. Durkheim used the term *anomie* with reference to a social structure that only weakly binds an individual into the social whole. Highly anomic societies are characterized by weak primary-group ties—family, church, community, and other such groups. An increasing division of labour weakens the social bond of the wider community and thus the integration of the individual into the moral universe of the society, integration that is needed for truly social behaviour. This leads to high rates of deviance, exploitation, and social disintegration. Durkheim was not a straight-line evolutionary theorist, however. He believed that the weakening of primary groups is of such harm to the individual and to the social order that it necessitates the emergence of new primary groups to bind the individual to the social whole.

Another possible outcome, apparently not considered by Durkheim, is that the processes undermining the collective conscience will continue unchecked. Stjepan Meštrović ([1988] 1993), who has studied Durkheim extensively, believes that the moral system of the West is rapidly eroding due to the growth of governments, corporations, and other bureaucratic organizations along with the weakening of traditional primary groups based on kinship and community. In order for individuals to internalize the moral code of a group, an emotional bond must exist among them; the creation of rational bureaucratic institutions (schools, social service agencies, media programs) simply cannot be effective in instilling this needed morality (47). Without a comprehensive system of morality, individuals are left without internal restraint on the will, leaving only external constraints to limit egoistic, self-aggrandizing individual behaviour.

Because by definition they lack any sense of mutuality or wholeness, our specializations subsist on conflict with one another. “The rule is never to cooperate,” writes cultural critic Wendell Berry (1977, 22), “but rather to follow one’s own interest as far as possible. Checks and balances are all applied externally, by opposition, never by self-restraint. Labor, management, the military, the government, etc., never forbear until their excesses arouse enough opposition to force
them to do so. The good of the whole of Creation, the world and all its creatures together, is never a consideration because it is never thought of; our culture now simply lacks the means for thinking of it.” This weakening of internal constraint may well be yet another causal factor in the rise of bureaucracy with its constant rule making and monitoring of performance. Without effective internal controls, human beings must increasingly be limited by external forces, controls that are not only expensive in terms of both time and money but are also relatively ineffective. This ineffectiveness has resulted in such phenomena as crime and deviance, economic exploitation, and the unfettered use of government to further the interests of the wealthy at the expense of the nation-state as a whole.

Meštrović (1993) characterizes the Western world as living simultaneously at the height of civilization and in the depths of barbarism. Our civilization has accomplished rapid transportation and instant communication to all parts of the earth, an unparalleled ability to produce and distribute goods and services around the world, widespread literacy and access to education, and an ongoing program of scientific research that promises ever greater understanding of the natural world. At the same time, we have weapons that threaten human life itself, democratic governments that engage in torture, and corporations that exploit nature, workers, and consumers. We experience extensive drug use and abuse, as well as widespread corruption and disillusionment in our political systems. Both barbarism and civilization advance by the day, Meštrović asserts. The two are indivisible.

Both Durkheim and Meštrović argue that the weakening of the collective conscience is due to the decline in the functions and importance of the traditional primary groups of family, community, and religious organizations, together with the increasing functional importance of the formal organizations of government and corporations. Many claim that it is the expansion of capital and/or the state that has caused this decline in the functional importance of primary groups. Robert Nisbet ([1953] 1990, 43–44), for example, maintains that the expansion of the state has weakened primary groups,
although he occasionally concedes that the expansion of capital and technology has had some role in the process. Mills ([1956] 1970, 6) is much more forthright, asserting that the centralization and enlargement of both state and capital have not only replaced many of the functions of primary groups but have turned “these lesser institutions into means for their ends.” Whatever the cause, the functional importance of primary groups is clearly weakening in modern life, while private and public bureaucracies become ever more pervasive and powerful, and this is affecting the character of the men and women who inhabit the societies in which this is happening.

While Durkheim was primarily concerned with the effects of these structural changes on the internalized moral guidance of the individual, other classical sociologists had broader concerns about the impact of these changes on individual actors. Marx writes of the process of alienation, in which the individual becomes estranged from work, from the community at large, and from the self. Believing that humans are above all “man the maker,” Marx roots alienation in the capitalist mode of production. Under capitalism, he claims, work becomes an enforced activity done at the behest of others for a pay-cheque. Forced into the detailed division of labour that characterizes the modern economy, workers lose autonomy and control; thus, physical activity is separated from mental life. The workers, assigned a specific task, do not set the pace, determine the actions, or own the tools of the job. They become alienated from the products of their labour and from the production process itself. Marx writes:

All these consequences follow from the fact that the worker is related to the product of his labour as to an alien object. For it is clear on this presupposition that the more the worker expends himself in work the more powerful becomes the world of objects which he creates in face of himself, the poorer he becomes in his inner life, and the less he belongs to himself. . . .

However, alienation appears not merely in the result but also in the process of production, within productive activity itself. . . . If the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active.
alienation—the alienation of activity and the activity of alienation. The alienation of the object of labor merely summarizes the alienation in the work activity itself.

This is the relationship of the worker to his own activity as something alien, not belonging to him, activity as suffering (passivity), strength as powerlessness, creation as emasculation, the personal physical and mental energy of the worker, his personal life (for what is life but activity?), as an activity which is directed against himself, independent of him and not belonging to him. (1964, 122, 124, 126)

Finally, by becoming alienated from the product and production process, the individual becomes alienated from the self and from society. Since humans are, above all else, creative beings who realize their potential through work, alienation from work leads to alienation from the self, from fellow human beings, and, finally, from life itself. “What is true of man’s relationship to his work, to the product of his work and to himself,” claims Marx (1964, 129), “is also true of his relationship to other men. . . . In general, the statement that man is alienated from his species-life means that each man is alienated from others, and that each of the others is likewise alienated from human life.” The more time workers spend on the job, the poorer their inner mental life, and the less human they become.

What is it about capitalism that leads to alienation? In a passage that evokes the rationalization process of Weber, Marx contends that the frantic drive to increase profits has led capitalism to associate itself with the advancement of science and the application of technology in creating new products and production processes:

Modern Industry rent the veil that concealed from men their own social process of production, and that turned the various, spontaneously divided branches of production into so many riddles, not only to outsiders, but even to the initiated. The principle which it pursued, of resolving each process into its constituent movements, without any regard to their possible execution by the hand of man, created the new modern science of technology. . . .
Modern Industry never looks upon and treats the existing form of a process as final. The technical basis of that industry is therefore revolutionary, while all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative. By means of machinery, chemical processes and other methods, it is continually causing changes not only in the technical basis of production, but also in the functions of the labourer, and in the social combinations of the labour-process. At the same time, it thereby also revolutionises the division of labour within the society, and incessantly launches masses of capital and of workpeople from one branch of production to another. ([1867] 1915, 532–33; emphasis added)

Capitalism thus becomes committed to science and technology in order to extract resources from the environment, develop new products, increase production, and replace workers and divide labour into ever simpler tasks. In Weber’s terminology, capitalism becomes committed to rationalization in exploiting its environment, fashioning its tools and machinery, and organizing its workforce and corporate structures. Rationalization—the increasing use of science, logic, and observation—becomes the main tool of capitalism to maximize profits. In committing itself to rationalization, capitalism necessarily alienates people from the production process, from social life, and, ultimately, from life itself.

Weber’s concern is broader still and focuses on the entire range of motivation for human behaviour. Rationalization results in a condition that, like anomie, afflicts the social structure and weakens traditional primary group ties. Like alienation, rationalization is carried forward by a population’s growth in numbers, by the ever more sophisticated and complex technology needed to sustain human life, and by an increasingly detailed division of labour. Weber characterizes rationalization as the increasing incidence of goal-oriented rational behaviour and the decline of behaviours based on broader human values, emotions, or traditions. Dependent on logic, science, and observation, rationalization seeks the most efficient solution to problems of human organization, production, or reproduction.
without regard to broader human values, traditions, or emotional ties. These four motivators of human action—values, emotions, traditions, and goal-oriented rational behaviour—define our very humanity. When infrastructural and structural change consistently promote and instill goal-oriented rational behaviour over behaviours that are guided by values, traditions, and emotions, the resulting sociocultural system promotes the very definition of alienation—the cutting off of individuals from themselves, from their fellow humans, and from a part of their own humanity.

When applied to social structure, rationalization is characterized by bureaucratization with its focus on the efficient attainment of organizational goals without context or concern for the interests of others or of the whole. Not only are these formal bureaucracies organized along rational lines; they are also designed to promote further rationalization of the sociocultural system. Science—a supremely rationalized system of thought—is used to fashion technology to extract and process materials from our environment. Science and social science are used to divide the labour force along rationalized lines and to develop technology and incentives to control human fertility. Rationalization is a mode of thought that increasingly dominates modern social life: it is through rationalized eyes that we as individuals view and value our world.³

THE IRRATIONALITY FACTOR:
THE CONTRADICTIONS OF BUREAUCRACIES

Why is it that as technocratic thinking increases, the irrational grows in intensity? Why the irrationality factor? The short answer is that because modern societies are dominated by bureaucracies that are firmly based on formal, technocratic thinking, enormous organizational power is often used to achieve ends that are counter to the interests and needs of the social whole. This Weberian explanation parallels both Durkheim’s and Meštrović’s assertion that the growth of civilization leads to the growth of barbarism and Marx’s position that capitalism and its
“frantic” search to increase profit margins necessarily leads to enslaving humans to a system out of human control. But irrationality is also promoted by certain characteristics of bureaucracies.

Bureaucracies act irrationally for three interrelated reasons. First, the detailed division of labour means that necessary expertise, authority, and operational knowledge are often missing when key decisions are being made. Leaders of a bureaucratic organization rarely have day-to-day operating knowledge of the organization itself, intimate knowledge of the products or services they produce, or the authority to challenge organizational decisions. The division of labour within a bureaucracy is such that all mid-level officers have narrow expertise and authority. For most of these employees, their continued employment and opportunities for promotion within the organization depend on following orders and not raising ethical or moral concerns that are beyond the scope of their office or even their consciousness. The emphasis is upon getting the job done in the most efficient manner. Members are not encouraged to question the goals of the organization or the impact that the organization’s actions might have on other workers, consumers, the environment, or society as a whole.

This problem is further compounded by the decline of many traditional institutions such as the family, community, and religion, which served to bind pre-industrial individuals to the interests of the group. Rationalization causes the weakening of the social bond and of traditional and religious moral authority (a process referred to as secularization). The internalization of moral and ethical standards of behaviour is thereby undermined; the efficient attainment of goals loses all counterweight. John DeLorean, a former General Motors executive (and famous for many things), muses over business morality: “It seemed to me, and still does, that the system of American business often produces wrong, immoral and irresponsible decisions, even though the personal morality of the people running the business is often above reproach. The system has a different morality as a group than the people do as individuals, which permits it to willfully produce ineffective or dangerous products, deal dictatorially and often unfairly with suppliers, pay bribes for business, abrogate
the rights of employees by demanding blind loyalty to management or tamper with the democratic process of government through illegal political contributions” (quoted in Wright 1979, 61–62). DeLorean goes on to speculate that this immorality is connected to the impersonal character of business organization. Morality, he says, has to do with people. “If an action is viewed primarily from the perspective of its effect on people, it is put into the moral realm. . . . Never once while I was in General Motors management did I hear substantial social concern raised about the impact of our business on America, its consumers or the economy” (62–63).

A second reason for the irrationality factor operating in bureaucracies is that technocratic thinking is focused upon immediate measurable results with little consideration for the long-term impact on the environment or on human beings. Economic organizations attempt, at every turn, to “externalize” the costs of doing business, to shift to the wider society the burden of dealing with the social and environmental problems they create. Joel Bakan (2004) tells the story of the Chevrolet Malibu. He first details the tragic story of Patricia Anderson and her four children, who were rear-ended while stopped at a red light after attending midnight mass on Christmas Eve, 1993. Anderson’s car burst into flames, severely injuring her and her children. (The drunk driver of the other car, as is all too typical, escaped with only minor injuries.) Anderson sued General Motors, arguing that the car was poorly designed as the fuel tank was too close to the rear bumper. “After a lengthy trial the jury found that GM had dangerously positioned the fuel tank to save costs, and Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Ernest G. Williams later upheld its verdict (though it reduced the damages). ‘The court finds that clear and convincing evidence demonstrated that defendants’ fuel tank was placed behind the axle on automobiles of the make and model here in order to maximize profits—to the disregard of public safety,’ he wrote, which put GM in breach of applicable laws” (62). Evidence at the trial showed that in the early 1970s, GM management had commissioned a cost-benefit report on the problem from one of its engineers, Edward C. Ivey:
In the report, Ivey multiplied the five hundred fuel-fed fire fatalities that occurred each year in GM vehicles by $200,000, his estimate of the cost to GM in legal damages for each potential fatality, and then divided that figure by 41 million, the number of GM vehicles operating on U.S. highways at the time. He concluded that each fuel-fed fatality cost GM $2.40 per automobile. . . . The cost to General Motors of ensuring that fuel tanks did not explode in crashes, estimated by the company to be $8.59 per automobile, meant the company could save $6.19 ($8.59 minus $2.40) per automobile if it allowed people to die in fuel-fed fires rather than alter the design of vehicles to avoid such fires. (63)

The company, of course, chose to serve its bottom line. Such cost-benefit analyses are not uncommon in either corporate or government bureaucracy; they are the very embodiment of rationalization.

In chapter 6, we saw how the rationalization of capitalism through such practices as automation, the deskilling of jobs through the detailed division of labour, the rise of contingency work, the tightening of wages, and offshoring significantly cuts costs and thus raises profits for corporations. As these practices become more widespread, they destroy the buying power of the very markets that these corporations depend upon. Corporations are not structured to make such broad analyses since they are focused solely upon the annual profits of their organization; how could such a corporation forego greater profitability by refusing to automate, ship jobs overseas, or take other rationalizing steps? Only a national government could take such a wider social context into account and take steps to counter such trends. But as discussed previously, in an effort to maximize their profits, many corporations effectively block governments from taking such steps to regulate their industries for the good of the social whole.

A third cause of the growing irrationality within bureaucracies relates to the overall goals of bureaucratic organizations. Although bureaucracies are technically designed for the efficient attainment of institutional goals, there is no mechanism to ensure that the goal of the organization itself is rational in any sense of the term. Thus,
businesses can pursue profit through the marketing of child safety
seats or violent video games; with either product, the bureaucracy
will work to maximize its profit. In the corporate realm, leaders
focus on profit rather than community, workers, consumers, moral-
ity, or the environment. Government bureaucracies are equally sus-
ceptible to following the orders of those at the top, whether or
not those orders are ethical. In the government realm, leaders are
often focused on the next election, campaign contributions, lobb-
ies, defence, or simply the overall economy. Thus, some agen-
cies of the American federal government violate civil liberties and
legal procedures in the name of national security. Long-standing
democratic principles and procedures are sometimes abrogated in
the name of efficiency. Military arms proliferate in search of secu-

rity and the build-up makes us less secure; military action is taken
to advance the “national” interests but in fact creates significant
blowback to the national interest. We have government tax policies
that are designed to redistribute wealth and income to the wealthi-
est 1 percent and government regulation of the economy that fails
to address the growing exploitation of the environment, workers,
or consumers. In sum, our most sacred traditions and cherished
values, as well as our livelihoods and our very lives, are violated
through the rationalization process.

On an even more horrific scale, we have the great atrocities of
our time (and because of the efficiency of bureaucracy, of any other
time): Hitler’s extermination camps, Stalin’s gulag and purges, and
Pol Pot’s “killing fields.” In the case of Nazi Germany, it was first
thought that the mass killings were the work of a few hard-core
SS officers. As William L. Shirer (1960, 972–73) points out, how-
ever, “the records of the courts leave no doubt of the complicity of
a number of German businessmen, not only the Krupps and the
directors of I. G. Farben chemical trust but smaller entrepreneurs
who outwardly must have seemed to be the most prosaic and decent
of men, pillars—like good businessmen everywhere—of their com-
munities.” C. Wright Mills (1958, 88–89) analyzes these modern
atrocities:
It is not the number of victims or the degree of cruelty that is distinctive; it is the fact that the acts committed and the acts that nobody protests are split from the consciousness of men in an uncanny, even a schizophrenic manner. The atrocities of our time are done by men as “functions” of social machinery—men possessed by an abstracted view that hides from them the human beings who are their victims and, as well, their own humanity. They are inhuman acts because they are impersonal. They are not sadistic but merely businesslike; they are not aggressive but merely efficient; they are not emotional at all but technically clean-cut.

In summary, bureaucratic structures combine three features to achieve their goals: (1) a narrow scope of authority, expertise, and knowledge on the part of individual officers within the organization, (2) an obsessive focus on immediate and measurable results for the organization rather than its long-term impact on the organization or the wider society, and (3) the arbitrary nature of bureaucratic goals. The domination of bureaucratic organization over the social structure of the world’s industrial societies has led to the height of both civilization and barbarism; the rational pursuit of the irrational is now built into the very structure of societies.