

Organizations and Networks



'Both Max Weber's and Michel Foucault's analyses of modern bureaucratic organizations are ultimately one-sided and unnecessarily pessimistic.' How far do you agree with this assessment?

This is the type of question that challenges you to reassess some highly influential work. Both Weber and Foucault have had an enormous impact on the study of organizations, so the idea that this work is one-sided may appear strange. However, in order to tackle the question successfully you will have to take the proposition seriously, even if you decide to argue against it.

Probably the best way to approach the question is to start by explaining what sociologists understand by 'bureaucracy' and 'organizations', giving some concrete examples on the way (pp. 783-4). This is the necessary prerequisite to an assessment of the theories that aim to explain the modern bureaucratic organization and its form.

At the centre of your answer must be an exposition and assessment of the ideas of Weber and Foucault. The task is to examine the writings of two very different theorists and is an implicit 'compare and contrast' invitation, but one complicated by the passing of time between the two bodies of theory. Several strategies are available, but an effective one would be to tell a fairly straightforward story about the development of organization theory, within which you locate first Weber (with his focus on bureaucracies and their relationship with democracies) and then, later, Foucault (concerned to document and theorize the expansion of organizational surveillance in modern societies). This has the benefit of using an obvious structure (via chronology).



To bring the theories closer together and produce a better essay, you would need to insert some periodic linking sentences, moving forward or backward in time to make comparative remarks. This can be effective, but can also be quite difficult to manage and you need to be careful not to force the comparative points.

In your assessment of the theories, the chapter should prove helpful. Weber's ideal-type bureaucracy is set out on pages 785-6. This makes clear that his evaluation of the superiority of bureaucracy as an organizational form was what made him pessimistic about the prospects for democratic systems and individual freedom. As a superior form, modern rational bureaucracy was bound to spread. Critics have not necessarily attacked his pessimistic tone, but instead concentrated on the analysis of bureaucracy as universally applicable. There are also good critical sections on the persistence of informal behaviour in organizations (pp. 784-7) and the potential 'dysfunctions' within bureaucracies (pp. 787-8). It is also worth considering Du Gay's more recent defence of bureaucracy (pp. 790-1).

The treatment of Foucault starts on page 791 and should be read in conjunction with the Classic Studies box on pages 794-5 and the textbox on 'computers vs workers' (pp. 810-1). Foucault is far more interested in the control of time and space within physical settings than Weber, for instance in his discussion of the Panopticon. Foucault's thesis of increasing surveillance is more concerned with disciplining the body, either through imprisoning it and punishing it, or legislating for what behaviours it may enjoy. In this sense Foucault too may be accused of overestimating the potential for such strategies to succeed and therefore being overly gloomy about the prospects for individual freedom. Nevertheless, it is your task to evaluate the theories in light of the evidence and you may arrive at a different conclusion.