Chapter 115

Post-Bureaucratic Organizations as Complex Systems:
Toward a Co-Evolutionary and Multiparadigmatic Perspective

Fabrizio Maimone
Libera Universita Maria SS Assunta, Italy

ABSTRACT

The term "post-bureaucratic" defines such organizations characterized by the absence or the reduced role of traditional bureaucracy. This contribution is aimed to provide a theoretical framework to explain the real nature and the hidden dynamics of post-bureaucratic systems, adopting a complex (Stacey, 1996; Mitleton-Kelly, 2003), critical (Wilmott, 1992; Alvesson, Bridgman, & Willmott, 2009) and multi-paradigmatic perspective (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Lowe, Magala, & Hwang, 2012; Patel, 2016), that considers also the influence of socio-psychological and socio-cultural factors. The findings of the research suggest it is opportune to go beyond the epistemological stance of the Weberian concept of ideal type, assuming that contemporary organizations may show hybrid (see Stark, 1992; Grandori, 1995) and multi-status configurations. The theoretical, methodological and practical implications of the adoption of this perspective are discussed in the final part of the chapter and are provided suggestions for present and future research.

INTRODUCTION

The *mise en discussion* of the traditional forms of governance in the public service and the emergence of post-fordist organizations (Rullani, 1998) in the context of private organizations, led to the rising of new forms of governance, coordination and control, that go far and beyond the dominium of traditional bureaucratic model. The term "post-bureaucratic" was coined to define such organizations, characterized by the absence or at least the reduction of the power of the traditional bureaucracy and by the adoption of indirect and soft forms of coordination and control.

According to Josserand, Teo and Clegg (2006, p. 54):

Conceptions of post-bureaucracy combine elements of an organic structure (Burns and Stalker, 1961) with changed modalities of more indirect and internalized forms of control, as it is suggested by Heydebrand (1989, p. 345) and Sewell (1998, p. 408).

The category of "post-bureaucratic" may include all types of organizations, public, private and no – profit that adopts soft modalities of management and control. Many scholars suggested that new organizational forms, such as post-bureaucratic organizations (see Victor & Stephens, 1994), may also hide a dark side:

- The apparent soft managerial touch can in fact hide manipulation, paternalism and indirect but very tightening forms of control (see Van Maanen & Barley, 1982).

Moreover, the analysis of flexible and de-structured organizations may sometimes reveal the persistence of bureaucratic structure and procedures, that may be present even in new organizational forms, assuming traditional and new features. For example, the project structures (see Hodgson, 2004), that are created by high-tech companies to run complex projects, such as the development of a new software, the design and production of a new airplane, etc., are regulated by a very structured set or rules, procedures and tasks, that implies also the production of a huge amount of technical documentation. If the concept of bureaucratic organization is interpreted *latu sensu*, it is possible to admit that the bureaucratic model is not declining, but on the contrary, is still up to date, even if in the New Millennium the dominium of technique seems to take the place of the supremacy of law.

The progressive re-bureaucratization of work activities seems to be not only a characteristic of high-tech business sector. In fact, the adoption of centralized governance systems, associated with pervasive auditing and antifraud procedures, are progressively reducing the level of autonomy and flexibility in many private organizations, in the direction of a (sometimes obsessive) centralized control. Moreover, the hypertrophic normative production of national authorities and supranational agencies put the normative compliance at the center of the functioning of banking and financial systems, especially in Europe. Supranational entities like Monetary World Fund, European Central Bank, European Commissions, Basel Committee, and the like, seem to rule the life of people, inside and outside organizations, establishing pervasive and, sometimes contradictory, set of norms. The progressive level of interconnection among political, social and economic systems and the consequent increasing of systemic complexity contribute to emphasize the impact of regulatory systems on everyday life. The same systems appears to many people distant, disconnected from real life, self – referential. The perceived distance of local and supranational bureaucratic agencies from the problem of real life, is progressively favoring the emerging, in many organizations, of defensive strategies, based on the avoidance and/or deviance from bureaucratic norms. The famous dictum pronounced by Tancredi (the young beloved nephew of the Prince of Salina), in the novel "Gattopardo" (Leopard), wrote by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1988), is still topical:

- Everything must change so that everything can remain the same.

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