

## KARL MARX'S CONCEPTIONS OF THE BUREAUCRATIC STRUCTURE AND ITS IMPLICATIVE SIGNIFICANCE

[O CONCEITO DE ESTRUTURA BUROCRÁTICA DE MARX E SEU SIGNIFICADO]

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**ABSTRACT:** Marx's conception of the bureaucratic structure represents an important yet insufficiently explored component of his theoretical legacy, despite its enduring theoretical and practical relevance for contemporary societies. Rather than treating bureaucracy merely as an administrative or technical apparatus, Marx approached it as a historically constituted form of power embedded in the social contradictions of modernity. By examining the cultural and ethical-political dimensions of bureaucracy within Marx's empirically grounded and economically determinist framework, this study seeks to illuminate how bureaucratic practices, norms, and institutional logics are shaped by material conditions and class relations. On this basis, it critically reassesses Marx's insights from the standpoint of contemporary theoretical debates on bureaucracy, power, and governance, thereby highlighting both the continuing significance and the theoretical limits of his approach in understanding modern forms of political organization.

**KEYWORDS:** Bureaucratic structure; bureaucracy; administrative pathology; state; bureaucratic culture

**RESUMO:** A concepção de Marx sobre a estrutura burocrática representa um componente importante, porém insuficientemente explorado, de seu legado teórico, a despeito de sua duradoura relevância teórica e prática para as sociedades contemporâneas. Em vez de tratar a burocracia meramente como um aparato administrativo ou técnico, Marx a abordou como uma forma de poder historicamente constituída inserida nas contradições sociais da modernidade. Ao examinar as dimensões culturais e ético-políticas da burocracia dentro do referencial empiricamente fundamentado e economicamente determinista de Marx, este artigo tem por objetivo elucidar como as práticas, as normas e as lógicas institucionais burocráticas são moldadas pelas condições materiais e pelas relações de classe. Com base nisso, o texto reavalia criticamente as percepções de Marx do ponto de vista dos debates teóricos contemporâneos sobre burocracia, poder e governança, destacando, assim, ambas a contínua importância e os limites teóricos de sua abordagem para a compreensão das formas modernas de organização política.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Estrutura burocrática; burocracia; patologia administrativa; Estado; cultura burocrática

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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The state constitutes one of the most important power institutions in society. The leadership and governance of political parties are primarily exercised through the state and its cadre of public officials (referred to by Karl Marx as the “bureaucratic structure”). The state functions as the central institution of the political system, and the core content of politics is concentrated in its activities. Beginning with Niccolò Machiavelli and throughout modern political theory, the state has been understood as an organization and a system of institutions possessing supreme authority over a defined territory, thereby constituting the most fundamental component of any political regime. Its role is determined by the concentration of power and strategic resources that enable it to exert decisive and effective influence over social transformations. The emergence of the state reflects the growing complexity of social life, as well as the differentiation of interests and economic, social, and cultural needs among individuals and social groups. It is precisely the state that ensures the unity of this internally fragmented whole by virtue of its capacity to represent social interests in a concentrated form and to realize them in practice.

However, historical experience in modern societies has also demonstrated that the modern state suffers from a persistent and profound pathology of governance, namely bureaucracy, together with its highly negative consequences for social development, such as corruption, formalism, excessive paperwork, cumbersome administrative apparatuses, alienation from social realities, arrogance, inefficiency, and enormous financial burdens. Contemporary social crises, or the risk thereof, are closely connected with this pathology. For this reason, the issue of the bureaucratic structure has become one of the most urgent and intractable theoretical and practical problems of modern societies, including Vietnamese society. At the same time, the strongly negative and hostile attitude of large segments of society toward the state’s bureaucratic apparatus, the primary instrument for implementing political decisions, has often been shaped by bureaucratic practices themselves. This attitude tends to obscure the fact that the bureaucratic structure has played, continues to play, and will continue to play a decisive role in the execution of political decisions. Consequently, it is rarely treated as an object of systematic scientific inquiry aimed at identifying ways to enhance its positive functions, remedy its pathologies, and thereby prevent or mitigate social crises.

Another important reality is that this complex of issues remains largely unexplored in Vietnam. Meanwhile, Marx’s conception of bureaucracy constitutes a significant theoretical contribution that has been further developed by two major modern thinkers, Max Weber and Michel Crozier. Although their approaches are necessarily incomplete and require further elaboration, especially in light of contemporary social realities, they provide essential resources for constructing a theory of social crisis (crisology) and its

possible resolutions.

In Vietnam, the state and public administration have mainly been studied from the perspective of policy design, policy limitations, and policy reform. The subjective dimension of governance, namely, organizational culture and the essential characteristics and structural regularities of bureaucracy as the subject of state administration, has been largely neglected. Yet social reality suggests that this dimension constitutes the root of many problems in modern governance. On this basis, this study selects Marx's conception of the bureaucratic structure as its object of inquiry. This choice is made not only as a necessary first step toward constructing a more comprehensive theory of bureaucracy, but also as a theoretical foundation for analyzing modern social crises that are closely connected with it, and for outlining possible paths of resolution. More broadly, this approach aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary social governance in Vietnam and to support the successful implementation of social renovation strategies.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH METHOD**

Literature Review: The issue of bureaucracy has been approached from multiple perspectives throughout the history of political and social thought. Within classical German philosophy, Hegel was the first to lay the theoretical foundation for understanding public officials as a constitutive component of objective ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), functioning as an intermediary between the universal interests of the state and the particular interests of civil society (Hegel, 1990). According to Hegel, public officials represent the rationality of the state and serve as the guarantors of social unity. However, this approach is grounded in objective idealism and tends to sacralize the state, treating the administrative apparatus as a direct embodiment of universal reason.

Karl Marx carried out a radical critical inversion of Hegel's position. Instead of conceiving the bureaucratic structure as a neutral incarnation of the common good, Marx analyzed it as a socio-historical phenomenon intrinsically linked to the internal contradictions of modern society (Marx & Engels, 1995). He demonstrated that bureaucracy is not merely an instrument of social mediation but also a social force with its own particular interests, displaying a tendency toward self-preservation and the reproduction of its own power through administrative, legal, and symbolic mechanisms. One of Marx's most significant contributions lies in transforming bureaucracy from an abstract philosophical category into an empirically observable social phenomenon.

Building on Marx's insights, Max Weber developed a sociological theory of bureaucracy that emphasized its technical rationality and its efficiency as a mode of organization for industrial society. Nevertheless, Weber also identified the "iron cage" of rationalization, in which individuals become increasingly constrained by the very rules and procedures they have created. Later, thinkers such as Michel Crozier and Claude Lefort focused on power loops, institutional closure, and the growing autonomy of bureaucratic

systems (Lefort, 1971).

In Vietnam, studies of the state and public administration have largely focused on institutional reform, public policy, and administrative modernization. Meanwhile, the subjective dimension of governance, that is, bureaucracy as a specific mode of social existence and a distinct form of power, has rarely been systematically theorized. Although Marxist-Leninist and Ho Chi Minhist traditions emphasize inspection, supervision, revolutionary ethics, and personal responsibility, these elements have not yet been integrated into a comprehensive theoretical framework that conceptualizes bureaucracy as a socio-historical phenomenon. This theoretical gap provides the principal motivation for the present study, which seeks to reconstruct Marx's conception of bureaucracy and to situate it within contemporary debates on power, legality, and modernization.

**Research Methodology:** This article is grounded in the methodological framework of dialectical materialism and historical materialism.

From the perspective of historical materialism, all forms of social organization, including the state and its bureaucratic apparatus, must be analyzed in relation to specific socio-economic conditions, class structures, and social contradictions. Accordingly, bureaucracy is not treated as a neutral or transhistorical entity, but as a historically constituted social phenomenon with determinate origins, developmental dynamics, and transformation tendencies. Dialectical materialism enables an analysis of bureaucracy as a dynamic and contradictory totality. It allows us to examine the internal tensions of bureaucratic systems: between universality and particular interests, between social service and self-preservation, between technical rationalization and the alienation of power. Rather than approaching bureaucracy as a static structure, this study conceptualizes it as a process in constant motion, in which organizational forms, normative expectations, and power relations continuously transform.

Methodologically, the study employs textual analysis of classical sources (Hegel, Marx, Engels, Lenin), interpretive reconstruction of conceptual frameworks, and critical comparison with contemporary theories of bureaucracy and governance. This approach does not merely aim to present Marx's views in a descriptive manner but seeks to uncover their theoretical potential for understanding and transforming contemporary forms of governance. By integrating dialectical and historical materialist approaches, the article aims to move beyond purely institutional or technical interpretations of bureaucracy. Instead, it situates bureaucratic structures within broader processes of social reproduction, power formation, and ideological legitimation. This methodological orientation allows the study to identify not only the functional dimensions of bureaucracy but also its latent contradictions, pathologies, and transformative possibilities.

### **3. RESEARCH RESULTS**

### **3.1. Marx's Conception of Bureaucracy**

Before Marx, Hegel, as Marx's immediate predecessor and one of the most influential figures in the development of his thought, had already laid the groundwork for a theory of bureaucracy within the field of political analysis. Hegel was the first to emphasize the role fulfilled by state officials in the process of social integration and rationalization, counteracting the fragmentation of civil society, particularly in the sphere of atomized economic interests. In this sense, he effectively initiated a systematic study of the institutions of state administration. The purpose and function of these institutions, according to Hegel, consist in constructing, safeguarding, and maintaining the general interest, that is, in defending the idea of society as a unified whole against the disintegrating tendencies produced by conflicting particular interests.

In Hegel's time, the bureaucratic system was primarily identified with the centralized European state, which he regarded as a progressive historical phenomenon. In his view, the principles of rational state organization found their most precise and complete expression in this model. In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel sought to synthesize Kantian moral rationalism with the traditions of German idealism, relating both to the concrete realities of the Prussian state of his time. The regulation of public life in Prussia thus stood in sharp contrast to the tradition of local self-governance characteristic of England (Hegel, 1990).

Hegel regarded the Prussian state as the rational organizational form of human society, both in terms of realizing the common good and in terms of enabling individuals to pursue their particular purposes in a regulated manner. He considered the bureaucratic class to be one of the three fundamental estates of society, alongside the industrial and agrarian classes. According to Hegel, the bureaucratic class was the only group that genuinely embodied and realized the universal interest. He assumed that the private interests of bureaucrats coincided with the general interest. The legitimacy of bureaucratic power and the trust placed in it by the people depended, in his view, on the political culture and moral-social qualities of this class. Hence, special attention had to be paid to the education and training of its members as both citizens and professionals capable of fulfilling their social functions and resolving emerging social problems.

Marx inherited this tradition of state theory, although he adopted a critical stance toward Hegel's legacy. Nevertheless, he continued to associate the bureaucratic system with the practice of state governance. His analysis of bureaucracy was grounded in his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. Whereas Hegel regarded the state as a structure standing above social estates and capable of unifying society by imposing rationality upon it, Marx rejected this view. Marx conceived bureaucracy as a social organism that, within a society divided by antagonistic contradictions, exploits those very contradictions for its own benefit while attempting to impose a legal and normative order that legitimizes its domination. He reproached Hegel for focusing exclusively on the "formal" organization of the bureaucratic apparatus while ignoring its

substantive content (Marx & Engels, 1995).

What distinguishes Marx's perspective is that it introduced a sociological and, more specifically, a political-analytical turn. For Marx, the primary objective of the bureaucratic class is to mitigate acute social conflicts. However, it does so by falsely presenting its own particularistic interests, namely, the preservation of the existing "rules of the game" in civil society, together with its material privileges, as the universal interest. While ostensibly serving a unifying function, bureaucracy in reality fragments and dominates.

Marx famously wrote: "The corporation is the materialism of the bureaucracy, and the bureaucracy is the spiritualism of the corporation. The corporation is the bureaucracy of civil society; the bureaucracy is the corporation of the state. In practice, therefore, the bureaucracy confronts the corporations as the 'state of civil society,' and the corporations confront the bureaucracy as the 'civil society of the state'... But when the state is awakened to real life and civil society, driven by its own rational impulse, emancipates itself from the domination of corporations, then the bureaucracy seeks to restore the corporation, because when the 'state of civil society' collapses, the 'civil society of the state' collapses with it" (Marx & Engels, 1995).

One of Marx's most significant contributions to the political theory of bureaucracy lies in his identification of its empirical characteristics, particularly in their negative manifestations. In his account, bureaucracy is first and foremost the realm of ignorance. He wrote: "The higher levels entrust the lower levels with everything concerning knowledge of particular matters, while the lower levels entrust the higher levels with everything concerning knowledge of general matters; thus, they mutually deceive one another" (Marx & Engels, 1995).

This mutual ignorance is not accidental but structurally produced by the social system itself. Marx argued that under capitalist conditions, the technological irrationality of social relations is distorted by private property. "The tasks of the state become desk tasks, and desk tasks become state tasks" (Marx & Engels, 1995). Individuals confront one another as personifications of social functions, and communication becomes interaction between abstract roles. Some are reduced to impersonal "cogs," while others subordinate the activity of officials to their private interests. In this context, bureaucratic efficiency is measured by conformity to rules rather than by social rationality. Dysfunctional outcomes are addressed through the creation of new regulations, which in turn generate further dysfunctions. Marx thus concluded: "Bureaucracy is a circle from which no one can escape" (Marx & Engels, 1995).

Marx also examined the concentration of power as an essential characteristic of the bureaucratic structure. According to him, this concentration directly reflects the economic concentration of capital in the hands of a few, which is translated into the political sphere. The distortions that emerge in the functioning of social organizations under capitalism are the result of the growing alienation of the administrative apparatus from society and from the

real needs of individuals. Administration is transformed into an end in itself, into an institution with its own internal life, incomprehensible to those outside it. Professional administrators become a closed estate, whose secrecy ensures their survival as a distinct social stratum. This, according to Marx, constitutes the estate-like, mafia-like nature of bureaucratic activity. He wrote: “The general spirit of bureaucracy is secrecy, mystery. The hierarchical structure secures this secrecy internally, while its corporative character ensures it externally” (Marx & Engels, 1995).

Bureaucracy, Marx argued, sinks into what he called “crude materialism,” manifesting itself in a relentless pursuit of office, where careerism becomes the dominant motive of action. The authentic substance of political authority is thus corrupted and transformed into power in its negative and distorted sense. In his critique of bureaucracy, Marx wrote: “The deification of authority is the principle of its knowledge. But within bureaucracy itself, spiritualism turns into crude materialism, the materialism of blind obedience, of faith in authority, of the mechanical execution of fixed formal actions, of predetermined principles, views, and traditions” (Marx & Engels, 1995).

The hierarchical structure of bureaucracy, Marx maintained, is essentially a hierarchy of knowledge. Knowledge is transformed, through hierarchy, from real knowledge into mere paperwork. It exists only as private knowledge within the bureaucratic system. This privatized form of knowledge becomes the mode of existence of bureaucratic authority. Thus, “authority is the principle of its knowledge, and the deification of authority is its mode of cognition” (Marx & Engels, 1995). Extending his analysis of nineteenth-century German bureaucracy, Marx characterized the French state under Bonapartism as a parasitic phenomenon. In his analysis of the French state, he described it as a “terrifying parasitic body that envelops French society like a net and blocks all its pores” (Marx & Engels, 1995). This analytical approach makes it possible to understand why the Paris Commune proclaimed the abolition of privileges and hierarchies as fundamental attributes of the bureaucratic apparatus.

Building upon Marx’s insights, Lenin, in *State and Revolution*, characterized bureaucracy as “a parasite that lives off bourgeois society, a parasite born of the internal contradictions that tear that society apart, yet one that precisely ‘blocks its pores’” (Lenin, 1977). A significant theoretical advance in Lenin’s analysis lies in his observation that the recruitment of bureaucrats from the middle and lower strata of society ultimately results in their separation from the masses and their integration into the life-world of the ruling class. By emphasizing the specific social origins of bureaucracy, Lenin introduced an important and highly promising line of inquiry: the bureaucratic apparatus of the state constitutes a permanent arena of struggle among the major political forces of society, each seeking control over administrative positions. This struggle becomes particularly intense during periods of regime transition, when every political actor attempts to secure the largest possible share of social resources.

### 3.2. *The Theoretical Implications of Marx's Conception of Bureaucracy*

As Western scholars have noted, an undeniable contribution of Marxist analysis lies in its transformation of bureaucracy into a tangible empirical phenomenon and in the fact that its description of this phenomenon remains strikingly relevant to the present day (Lefort, 1971). Contemporary analyses continue to confirm that bureaucracy generates self-reinforcing loops of behavior upon which its functioning is based. Lower-level officials tend to defer initiative and responsibility for complex issues to higher authorities, while higher authorities compel subordinates to deal with particular problems without transmitting adequate information upward, so as not to “disturb” their superiors. This form of cohesion, grounded in structured ignorance, binds lower and higher levels of power together into a single bureaucratic system.

Withdrawal from the bureaucratic organization is only possible through the renunciation of one's position, which simultaneously entails the loss of privileges, material advantages, and symbolic status associated with office. One of the persistent characteristics of bureaucratic organization is careerism, manifesting itself in the fact that the ultimate aim of action becomes the preservation or enhancement of one's position within the hierarchical order. Just as in Marx's time, contemporary bureaucracies present themselves as extensive networks of interwoven relationships based not on objective criteria of contribution derived from the social division of labor, but on personal connections, reciprocal favors, and informal loyalties.

Bureaucratic structures operate and evolve through power blocs rather than through strictly formalized hierarchical relations. In this process, struggles between levels of authority replace the rational coordination of functions, and organizational activity is increasingly subordinated to the private interests of closed, mafia-like networks. In this sense, Marx's critique of bureaucracy as a self-referential and self-preserving system remains theoretically productive.

Claude Lefort offers an important observation in this regard. He argues that struggles between power blocs and political factions over key positions become especially intense during transitional periods, when social regimes undergo structural transformation. Although bureaucratic activity is often institutionally separated from revolutionary turning points, the bureaucratic stratum is never entirely indifferent to newly emerging political orders. Once the revolutionary phase subsides, ruling classes tend to integrate the bureaucratic stratum into the new rules of the game, thereby reinforcing its power. Lefort writes: “State bureaucracy adapts to the most diverse regimes. This is demonstrated by the case of France, where it has remained a remarkably stable phenomenon since the First Empire. The same can be said of bureaucracies in occupied countries, which are naturally utilized by foreign authorities and continue to perform their administrative functions. In principle, bureaucracy is indifferent to the interests and values defended by any particular political regime. This means that it serves dominant forces or classes and stands between those who rule and those who are ruled” (Lefort,

1971).

Thus, as a political phenomenon, bureaucracy possesses a universal character. In this sense, it is inseparable from the organizational nature of the modern state itself. Its specific forms vary, but these variations are determined not only by regime types, but also by historical legacies, national psychologies, and dominant modes of social consciousness.

The French political theorist Anicet Le Pors writes: “Experience shows that changing the mode of production, the social system, or the mode of governance is not sufficient to eliminate the danger of bureaucratic restoration. The risks of its re-emergence require identifying the causes that generate it, as well as a strong political will to avoid the logic of earlier development and to establish conditions that allow for greater social effectiveness. The rejection of ‘all statehood’ is certainly not enough to accomplish this” (Le Pors, 1985). Following Marx, Lenin consistently regarded inspection and supervision as effective tools for counteracting the negative tendencies of bureaucracy and as central components of political leadership. He stated: “Issuing directives is one thing; organizing the practical work of verification and control is another” (Lenin, 1977). He further emphasized: “Selecting people, establishing personal responsibility for concrete tasks, and verifying actual performance, this is the core of all political work, and it remains so” (Lenin, 1977).

Ho Chi Minh creatively developed and concretized Lenin’s insights. He argued that once political objectives and resolutions are established, the central task becomes their practical implementation. The essential shift must be from drafting resolutions and directives to selecting appropriate leaders and supervising their execution. This constitutes the decisive issue for a ruling party: finding the right people and verifying their work. The correctness of political decisions depends on many factors, among which inspection plays a decisive role. The ultimate purpose of inspection is to refine the leadership process itself, spanning decision-making, implementation, and evaluation, while identifying exemplary individuals, preventing violations, preserving discipline, and strengthening party organizations. Ho Chi Minh stated: “Only through inspection can we mobilize the people’s initiative and immense strength, understand the capacities and shortcomings of cadres, and provide timely correction and assistance” (Ho Chi Minh, 2011).

He further emphasized that inspection must not be confined to the post-decision phase but should be integrated into all stages of policy formulation, concretization, and execution. He sharply criticized leadership styles that focus exclusively on issuing directives while neglecting real-world supervision. He warned against cadres who believe that sending out numerous circulars suffices to complete their work, without engaging in follow-up, assistance, and concrete verification. Effective inspection, he argued, requires two fundamental conditions: systematic regularity and the moral authority of inspectors. Inspection must operate at all levels, from central to local, through specialized institutions staffed by competent and reputable individuals. Ho Chi Minh famously remarked: “Skillful inspection exposes all shortcomings; moreover, skillful

inspection gradually reduces them” (Ho Chi Minh, 2011).

In the framework of the principle “the Party leads, the State manages,” the Party must inspect its organizations, cadres, and members operating within the state apparatus, ensuring strict adherence to its political line. Through inspection, the Party also refines its own strategies. This form of supervision contributes to improving the effectiveness of state governance while preventing abuses of power. The Communist Party of Vietnam has emphasized: “Promptly and strictly handle party organizations and members who violate the Party’s political platform, charter, resolutions, directives, regulations, and the laws and policies of the State; publicly disclose disciplinary outcomes; and strengthen supervision of leading officials with respect to their duties, powers, and ethical conduct” (Communist Party of Vietnam, 2016).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In contemporary political science, the analysis of bureaucracy has moved beyond the narrow view of it as a purely administrative phenomenon. Bureaucracy is not merely a technical mechanism for implementing public functions, but a specific form of power organization and a mode of social existence shaped by historical conditions. Marx’s critique reveals that bureaucracy is not a neutral mediator of social interests, but a structure embedded in social contradictions, driven by tendencies toward self-preservation, alienation, and the transformation of universal interests into particular privileges. This perspective highlights the need to reconsider the relationship between the state, power, and society. The principle of the rule of law emerges as a crucial normative framework for limiting bureaucratic arbitrariness, protecting individual freedom and dignity, and ensuring that power remains accountable to the people. In this sense, Marx’s analysis provides not only a critical diagnosis of bureaucratic pathologies, but also a theoretical foundation for rethinking modern governance in a more democratic and human-centered direction.

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