

Marxist Approach to Bureaucracy: Introductory, Origin and Other Details

Introduction

Like Weber, Marx did not build up a comprehensive theory of bureaucracy and, to speak the truth, he had no intention. His main interest centred around three basic concepts the development of capitalism, the magnitude or extent of its exploitation of working class and, finally, the emancipation of working class. In the course of analysis of these three basic issues he has discussed (although in laconic form) almost all the major issues of economics, politics and sociology. Bureaucracy is one of these issues. I think that his view on bureaucracy is not a complete theory of bureaucracy.

He studied the development of capitalism in some major capitalist countries of Western Europe and, in course of his investigation or study, he observed how the capitalist states of Europe were administered. This approach of Marx finally leads to the exposure of administration of capitalist states. He saw that bureaucracy, to the capitalists, is not simply a mode of public administration but also an instrument of exploitation of the working class. This is the gist of Marxist approach to bureaucratic administrative system. In this section I shall quote three leading observations of Marx and Engels.

In the Manifesto of Communist Party (hereafter only Manifesto) Marx and Engels wrote: “The executive of the modern state is a committee for making the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie” Marx and Engels here did not directly refer to bureaucracy. Needless

to say that in all capitalist states the executive power is vested in the hands of a group of administrators who are called bureaucrats and these persons represent the interests of the capitalists.

It is believed that, according to Marx, the rise of bureaucracy is closely associated with the rise of state and Marx and Engels have thrown light on this issue in their *The German Ideology*. I quote a lengthy passage from *The German Ideology*: “By the mere fact that it is a class and no longer an estate, the bourgeoisie is forced to organise itself no longer locally, but nationally, and to give a general form to its average interests. Through the emancipation of private property from the community, the state has become a separate entity, alongside and outside civil society, but it is nothing more than the form of organisation which the bourgeois are compelled to adopt, both for internal and external purposes, for the mutual guarantee of their property and interest” —Finally I quote few lines from Marx’s.

The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte. He says: “The executive power with its enormous bureaucratic and military organisation, with its ingenious state machinery, embracing wide strata, with a host of officials numbering half a million, besides an army of another half million, this appalling parasite body, which enmeshes the body of French society like a net and chokes all its pores, sprang up in the days of absolute monarchy” From these quotations or observations it is now clear what Marx actually thought about bureaucracy. He was sure that the rise of bureaucracy and growth of bourgeoisie are inextricably connected. He also arrived at the conclusion that bureaucracy was not simply a mode of administration but an instrument of exploitation.

Origin of Marx's Thought:

In the last section I have quoted three passages from Marx's writings which clearly show what Marx thought about bureaucracy. The Marxists and even non-Marxists have endeavoured to explore the origin of his conception about bureaucracy. In an article published in A Dictionary of Marxist Thought (Second Edition) we find the following comment: "Marx formed his theory of bureaucracy on the basis of his personal experience of the malfunctioning of the state administration . He deduces the notion of bureaucracy from the bureaucratic relationship existing between the power-holding institutions and the social groups subordinated to them".

He observed that in France and several other states of Europe the entire state administration was run by the bureaucrats and these state officers were dictated by the king or any type of dictator. The bureaucracy was so common in his time that he very frequently used the phrase bureaucratic phenomenon. This implies that the entire administration was under the full control of few officers known as bureaucrats.

In the materialist conception of history Marx has endeavoured to show that the idea of bureaucracy has not fallen from heaven. In primitive and slave societies there was no existence of state and no bureaucracy. So one can say that the system of bureaucracy was deliberately created by a group of men who controlled the state. Their sole aim was to ensure the good management of state so that the capitalists can exploit the working class without any problem. In the German Ideology Marx and Engels have thrown light on this aspect. In the German Ideology they have said: "the state is the form in which the individuals of a ruling class assert their common interests".

We thus find that, according to Marx and Engels, the emergence of state and rise of bureaucracy are, in fact, inseparable from each other. Marx has said that during feudal period there was a clear existence of state but it had no separate and powerful existence of bureaucracy. The state was more or less controlled by various forces and feudal lords were the most prominent. Marx and Engels have said that, in capitalism, state came to establish its separate existence and capitalists encouraged this phenomenon.

But subsequently the capitalists came to realise that in its attempt to safeguard its objective of profit motive the help of state was necessary. It also thought that the state must be brought under proper administration. Bureaucracy was the consequence of this plan. An unholy nexus was created, under the aegis of the bourgeoisie, between the state and the capitalists. In Marx's view the rise and growth of bureaucracy must be viewed in the light of capitalism.

Marx observed that Louis Bonaparte was gradually accumulating more and more power and dictatorial power was exercised by him. In this attempt (or we may call it a process) he was assisted by bureaucracy and military. Particularly the former helped to make and execute laws and to strengthen the base of despotism. The bureaucracy became rather an indispensable part of Bonaparte's administration and despotism.

There were legislature and other organs of government but in the face of Bonaparte's growing power which may be called dictatorship they were simply puppets. Marx has said: "Bureaucracy must, therefore, make it its job to render life as material as possible". In the German

Ideology Marx and Engels saw that in most of the states in Germany bureaucracy was acquiring more and more power and independence.

Marx on Nature of Bureaucracy:

If we go through Marx's writings that contain his ideas on bureaucracy we shall find that the concept failed to receive his accolade:

(1) Rather, he thought bureaucracy, in a capitalist state system, is a party to exploitation and most probably for this reason he used two words state bureaucracy. Both Marx and Engels treated bureaucracy as part and parcel of the whole capitalist state structure. Bureaucracy, in Marx's opinion, helped the bourgeois state in its activities of exploiting the working class. I believe this is the significance of the phrase state bureaucracy.

(2) In Marx's time there existed bureaucracy in both liberal and autocratic state systems. In other words, it was a very common system of administration of states irrespective of differences in state administration or structure. The probable reason was that Industrial Revolution completely changed the political, economic and social structures of society and state bureaucracy established its inevitability everywhere. Even in parliamentary system there was great need for state bureaucracy.

(3) I have already quoted a passage from Marx's *Vie Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where it has been stated that in France there was an enormous bureaucratic and military organisation. The significance is that the state systems of eighteenth century could not perform their normal and administrative duties without these two structures—bureaucracy and military.

(4) Marx has said that in France bureaucracy established class rule “under the absolute monarchy, during the first revolution, under Napoleon, bureaucracy was only the means of preparing the class rule of the bourgeoisie, under the Restoration, under Louis Philippe, under the parliamentary Republic,’ it was the instrument of ruling class.” What transpires from the above analysis is that Marx treated bureaucracy as an instrument of ruling class—the most powerful class of society.

(5) According to Marx the bureaucracy is an “appalling parasitic body”. He also calls it dreadful parasitic substance. These phrases are not symbols of eulogy. He vehemently opposed the bureaucratic system of all capitalist structures of his time. He knew that bureaucracy is, no doubt, an efficient instrument of administration but it is the most powerful instrument of administration that tortures and exploits working class. Marx and Engels in several of their writings have high-lighted this.

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(6) From the study of history Marx arrived at the conclusion that the bureaucratic system that prevailed in the contemporary states was not neutral at all. I have already noted that it is a powerful instrument of class rule and class exploitation. Criticising Hegel’s (1770-1830) Philosophy of Right Marx said, “The bureaucracy has the essence of the state.” What Marx meant by this was that bureaucracy not only ensures class rule but the capitalist class uses it to establish supremacy in all sections of the state. If so, in Marx’s opinion, bureaucracy cannot be separated from state system.

(7) Victor M. Perez-Diaz (State Bureaucracy and Civil Society) says that Marx insists that a crucial characteristic of the bureaucracy is that of behaving like a private owner vis-a-vis the public resources, it conserves a substantial degree of control over these resources and uses them for their own purpose ... According to Marx, the bureaucracy is bearer of private interests and a reinforcer of private spirit in the society as a whole. It is precisely by reinforcing such privatism or particularism of the society that the bureaucracy may claim a monopoly of the public-spirit—a monopoly of public resources.

Bureaucracy in Advanced Capitalism:

Ralph Miliband, a noted Marxist thinker, in his *The State in Capitalist Society. The Analysis of Western System of Power* (1973) has analysed bureaucracy and its role in advanced capitalism. *The Servants of the State*—he has analysed the important aspects of bureaucracy that prevails in capitalist states. He has said that the political leaders of advanced capitalism have clear party colour, the bureaucrats have no such colour—they are neutral or are supposed to be neutral.

Even the top leaders of the party, after coming to power, bring their men and give important posts to them. But they do not work for party—they are politically neutral. “The claim insistently made, not least by civil servants themselves, that they are politically neutral, in the sense that, their overriding, indeed their exclusive concern, is to advance the business of the state under the direction of their political masters”. The so-called fact is that civil servants or bureaucrats in capitalist states such as USA are, in their administrative functions, neutral.

But Miliband does not accept this general view about bureaucracy in capitalist countries. The neutrality of bureaucrats in capitalist countries is a myth. Miliband says. ...these men do play an important part in the process of governmental decision—making, and therefore constituting a considerable force in the configuration of political power in their societies” We therefore, find that the bureaucrats of capitalist countries are indispensable parts of administration and they also carry political colour with them. In other words, they are part of politics.

Another aspect of bureaucrats of capitalist countries is that while making policy and implementing it they claim that they are neutral. We thus find that politically they claim to be neutral and in policy implementing affairs they are neutral. Political consideration never influences them while executing the adopted policies. We find Miliband to make the following observation: “As for the manner in which this power is exercised, the notion of neutrality which is often attached to it is surely in the highest degree misleading; indeed a moment’s reflection must suggest that it is absurd”. In every advanced capitalist country individual civil servants (bureaucrats are also called in this name) have occasionally played a notable part in social, administrative and military functions.

It is not expected that the top civil servants come from the power elite groups or policy making organisations. They have obtained their education from the most important and top academic institutions. These persons have built up their own political ideas and inclination and when they become top administrators their policies will be influenced by their political inclinations and family background. The

consequence is whenever a government decides to introduce “reforms” for the general benefit of public these civil servants are not supposed to be neutral, rather they oppose the reforms of the government.

Conservatism is another feature of bureaucrats. These officers do not want any change-a change for the better-“top civil servants in these countries are not simply conservative in general, they are conservative in the sense that they are the conscious or unconscious allies of existing economic and social elites. They favour existing social and economic structures of society.”

The civil servants are very often protectors and propagators of private capitalism and this role has expanded from the eighties of the last century due to the advancement of globalisation. Ralph Miliband has said that after the World War II a close nexus has developed between top civil servants and corporate capitalism; and bureaucracy helps the corporate capitalism in the attainment of objectives. Miliband says that bureaucracy is a great supporter of corporate capitalism and help in various ways. In recent years the state, being pressurised by public opinion, intervenes with the functioning of economic sector and in this affair the civil servants play a crucial role. Miliband has studied the American system and then concludes.

Both bureaucrats and politicians claim that they are the well-wishers and partners of national economic interests. But politicians do not always find scope or time to discuss policy matters with the magnates of private capitalism. This job is done by the top bureaucrats. Miliband’s observation is worth noting: “The world of administration and the world of large scale enterprise are now increasingly linked in

terms of an almost interchanging personnel. More and more businessmen find their way into one part or the other of the state system at both political and administrative levels”. This type of interchangeability between top civil servants and important leaders of corporate or private capitalism in US or other mature capitalism is not new or uncommon: Nobody criticises it. The moot point is in advanced capitalist state bureaucracy is not busy with public administration alone but with other functions.

Lenin on Bureaucracy:

Lenin in his *The State and Revolution* (1918) has elaborately discussed bureaucracy. Like Marx and Engels, Lenin believed that bureaucracy was a machine used by the bourgeoisie to exploit the common people-particularly the working class. But to him in this affair the bureaucracy is not alone, it performs this job in collaboration with the military. Lenin quotes few lines from Marx’s letter to Kugelmann written on April 12, 1871. Marx wrote “the next attempt of the French Revolution will no longer, as before, to transfer the bureaucratic military machine from one hand to another but to smash it” Lenin accepted this view of Marx that both bureaucracy and military are the two arms of capitalist government and the chief aim of the revolutionaries would be to smash it.

Lenin in his *The State and Revolution* has said that the real aim of all revolutionaries would be to smash or destroy the military and bureaucratic alliance so that it cannot get any scope to exploit the working class. Earlier I have specifically noted that, to Marx, bureaucracy was nothing but a machine used by the bourgeois class. Lenin does not depart from this fundamental premise, he has simply elaborated and emphasised Marx’s contention.

Lenin fully realised that there was immense utility of bureaucracy and other forms of bourgeois administration. Naturally, it is quite Utopian to think of abolishing all forms of older administration but to utilise them for the furtherance of proletarian interests. For example, Lenin has said “The way out of parliamentarism is not the abolition of representative institution and the electoral principles, but the conversion of the representative institutions from talking shops to working bodies.

Similarly, Lenin did not want to destroy the bureaucratic system of bourgeois administration but to keep it for the use and benefit of proletarian rule. That’s why we find him saying: There can be no thought of abolishing the bureaucracy at once everywhere and completely. That is Utopia. But to smash the old bureaucratic machine at once and to began immediately to construct a new one that will permit us to abolish gradually all bureaucracy—this is not Utopia” Lenin further observes — “We are not Utopians. We do not include in “dreams” of dispensing at once with all administration, with all subordination”.

From the above observations made by Lenin it is crystal clear that he fully realised the importance of state administration in general and bureaucracy in particular and for that reason he did not suggest the abolition of bourgeois administrative system of which the bureaucracy constitutes the chief part. He realised the importance of bureaucracy in administration. From his analysis it is also clear that Lenin did not dispense with the importance of bureaucracy.

But the kernel of his thought is that this type of bureaucracy is to be used for the interest of the proletarians. Lenin in his analysis made

endeavour to assert that he was neither a Utopian nor an anarchist thinker. He thought that the abolition of the bureaucracy of capitalist regime will lead to great anarchy or turmoil and this he did not prefer. The function and character of bureaucracy must be changed for the benefit of the working class.