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Unlikely allies: Bureaucracy as a cultural trope in a grassroots volunteer organization

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the role of bureaucratic organizing in a grassroots volunteer organization, which emerged during the so-called refugee crisis in an emergency refugee shelter in Germany. Most research agrees that this type of organization is by definition counter-bureaucratic. In the organization I studied, however, volunteers adopted, accepted and acclaimed bureaucratic organizing as the only, natural and self-evident way of making the grassroots work. Drawing on ethnographic research, my analysis unravels how bureaucracy became a common frame of reference that allowed the volunteers to self-organize despite their different motivations, attitudes and social backgrounds. To theorize these findings, the paper draws on the concept of a cultural trope. In so doing, it offers a more nuanced understanding of bureaucracy in grassroots volunteer organizations that might stimulate scholars to rethink its role in other fluid, dynamic and value-driven organizations.

1. Introduction

> "If anybody asked me what I recommend when you want to self-organize in a volunteer organization, I would say STRUCTURE from the first day on." (Hilmar, volunteer)

This article draws on ethnographic research carried out in a grassroots volunteer organization, which emerged during the so-called refugee crisis in a refugee emergency shelter in Berlin, Germany. Reacting to a post on social media, hundreds of volunteers showed up at the newly established shelter in order to support the arriving refugees. While chaos and improvisation ruled in the first days, volunteers quickly self-organized by using bureaucratic practices, such as formalizing and standardizing work processes, hierarchies and organizational structure. When I entered the shelter as a researcher a few weeks later, the ways in which volunteers described their work and organization fascinated me: Words like shifts, plans, supervisor, organigram, hierarchy, structure and rules were part of nearly every conversation. To my surprise, these words seemed to carry positive connotations.

In the light of extant literature, this seemed weirdly out of place. Scholars have casted these organizations as "counter-bureaucratic" (Ashcraft, 2001). As opposed to Weber's bureaucracy, ideal-typical grassroots volunteer organizations are seen to be coined by shared values and motivations of organizational members, informal coordination, democratic decision-making and strong interpersonal relations (Chen, Lune, & Queen, 2013; Ganesh & McAllum, 2012; Grönlund, 2011). Studies have already shown that this ideal-typical depiction does not necessarily hold in empirical reality (Ashcraft, 2001; Chen, 2009; Tkacz, 2015). Commonly, these organizations tend to bureaucratize once they grow or mature (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016). However, a considerable amount of previous research has suggested that bureaucratization endangers if not colonizes the grassroots and causes tension, conflict and loss of community (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997, Kreutzer & Jäger, 2011; McNamee & Peterson, 2014), although it can increase legitimacy, certainty and predictability (Ashcraft, 2001; Chen, 2009). Nonetheless, there is a tendency to picture bureaucracy as the villain of this story, which imperils the liberating and alternative organizing principles of the grassroots (Reedy, King & Coupland, 2016).

My informants' accounts challenged this narrative as they casted bureaucratic practices in a positive light. The aim of this article is to explore this tension between the literature's assumptions and the volunteers' reports. Hence, it pursues the following research questions: What was the role of bureaucracy in this organization? How can we explain that volunteers adopted, accepted or even acclaimed bureaucratic practices? In order to explore these questions, I use the contrast between the ideal-typical bureaucracy and the grassroots volunteer organization as a heuristic starting point. By means of these etic concepts, I seek to unravel how the volunteers made sense of bureaucratic practices and the ways they shaped organizing and social relations. I will argue that bureaucracy's role was that of a shared cultural trope (Townsley, 2001; Sewell & Barker, 2006; White, 1978), a common frame of reference, which shaped the volunteers' understanding of the situation they faced in the refugee shelter – the challenge to organize a huge, diverse volunteer workforce in a highly dynamic environment. It

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provided simplified, ready-made interpretations and templates for action, which appeared natural, self-evident and obvious. At the same time, its figurative use allowed the organization to incorporate ambivalences and criticism. In developing this argument, the paper intends to spark and revive the interest "for formal organization" (Du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2016) in unorthodox places, such as the case at hand. While the article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the role of bureaucracy in grassroots volunteer organizations, the concept of bureaucracy as a cultural trope might also encourage scholars to revisit the role of bureaucratic organizing in other fluid organizations (Palmer, Benveniste, & Dunford, 2007), such as start-ups, adhocracies or co-working spaces.

2. Bureaucracy: out-dated and overcome?

Weber's bureaucracy is a pivotal concept of organizational theory (Clegg, 2016; Cummings & Bridgman, 2011; Greenwood & Lawrence, 2005). He observed tremendous ideological shifts in the early 20th century, which he labelled the 'disenchantment of the world' (1919 [2002], pp. 488–490) – a historical process by which supernatural explanations of phenomena lose their currency and are replaced by reason and empiricism. In the context of this transformation, bureaucracy, an organizational type based on rational-legal authority, ascends (p. 661), fuelled by the rise of financial markets, by the growing size and complexity of organizations, and by increased demand for both professional services and technological advance (pp. 655–661).

Weber's ideal-typical bureaucratic organization is characterized by rules, duties, and rights for each position, resulting in a 'firmly ordered system of super- and subordination' (p. 650). Positions are staffed with qualified professionals[1] (p. 651), whose recruitment is guided by impersonality (p. 661). Bureaucrats make decisions based on a rational calculation of means and ends, irrespective of their passions and attitudes (pp. 662–664). They document decisions in 'files' and are thus accountable (p. 651). Although these principles hardly occur in their 'pure' form in empirical reality (p. 677), Weber regarded bureaucracies as technically superior to other organizations (pp. 660–661). Nonetheless, he was deeply concerned about undesirable consequences, such as the pursuit of unethical goals (p. 669), or the ossification of power relations (p. 668) at the expense of a sense of community within an organization (pp. 669–671). On a societal level, he feared bureaucracy's potential to foster antidemocratic tendencies (ibid.) and undermine craftsmanship, autonomy, and individuality (p. 655).

Weber's belated readership among organizational scholars has frequently misread his notion of bureaucracy as a prescriptive model for efficient organization (Lounsberry and Carberry, 2005; Warner, 2007). As such, scholars have criticized bureaucracy for its slowness, rigidity, and failure to innovate, calling it a relic in a globalized, complex, dynamic, technology-driven world (Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994; Palmer et al., 2007). Another critique echoes Weber's concerns about bureaucracy's capacity for moral blindness (famously Bauman, 2013), along with its propensity to centralize power, hinder individuality, and foster disenchantment in the workplace (e.g. Clegg & Baumeler, 2010; Courpasson, 2000; Cummings & Bridgman, 2011). As an 'alternative' to bureaucracy (Parker, Cheney, & Fournier, Land, 2014; Reedy et al., 2016), scholars have proposed models based on self-organization, democratic decision-making, informal coordination, and authentic personal member relationships (Chatterton, 2010; Kokkinidis, 2015; Sutherland, Land, & Böhm, 2014; Uitermark, 2015). Indeed, bureaucracy seems to have 'fallen from grace' (Lounsberry and Carberry, 2005) among organizational scholars. Commonly, it is seen as an anachronistic and irrelevant model for understanding current organizational realities (see Greenwood & Lawrence, 2005).

These correctives might be overhasty (Adler, 2011; Graeber, 2015). Studies have shown that attempts to de-bureaucratize often leave the bureaucratic core of an organization intact (Briscoe, 2007; Hodgson & Briand, 2013; Kärreman, Sveningsson, & Alvesson, 2002; Kornberger, Meyer, Brandtner, & Höllerer, 2017; Rhodes & Price, 2010). The 'softening' of bureaucracy (Courpasson, 2000) under slogans like New Public Management (Du Gay, 2008), Open Government (Kornberger et al., 2017) or the entrepreneurial university (Styhre & Lind, 2010) indicate that bureaucracy is tenacious (Courpasson & Reed, 2004; Hirst & Humphreys, 2015). As reasons for its persistence, scholars cite its potential to limit oligarchic tendencies (Courpasson & Clegg, 2006; Courpasson & Dany, 2003; Freeman, 1972–1973), its capacity to realize economies of scale (Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010), and its ability to reconcile the needs for both certainty and efficiency (Alder & Borys, 1996; Adler, 2011). Moreover, the ideal-typical bureaucratic ethos continues to promise fairness, recognition, and care (Armbrüster & Gebert, 2002; Du Gay, 1999, 2004, 2008; Du Gay & Vikkelsø, 2016).

These defences of ideal-typical bureaucracy notwithstanding, the concept's role in research remains unclear (Greenwood & Lawrence, 2005). Scholars tend to use it either ceremonially (Lounsberry & Carberry, 2005) or as a counterpoint to 'new' models of organization, or hybrids thereof: post-bureaucracy (Heckscher & Donnellon, 1994), neo-bureaucracy (Sturdy, Wright, & Wylie, 2016), the Kafkaesque bureaucracy (Warner, 2007), or anti-bureaucratic forms of organization (Armbrüster & Gebert, 2002).

3. Bureaucracy and the grassroots volunteer organization: antipodal ideal types

Extant literature constructs the grassroots volunteer organization as an ideal-typical counter-model to bureaucracy (Dutta, 2017; Eliasoph, 2009; Carman & Nesbit, 2013). The volunteer organization is value-bound (Chen et al., 2013), enacting shared values such as collectivism and equality with practices fostering flexibility and responsiveness to members' needs (Chen, 2009). Typically, coordination is at most semi-formal (Smith, 1975; Taylor, Mallinson, & Bloch, 2008). Rules, if they exist, are flexible, negotiable, and subject to collective beliefs and missions, encouraging decentralized decision-making, whether democratic or consensus-based (Seibel, 2015; Rothschild & Stephenson, 2009). Egalitarianism is said to ensure the on-going engagement of volunteers (Wilderom & Miner, 1991), granting them voice (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997) and thus limiting turnover (Hustinx, 2010). Moreover, grassroots volunteer organizations are typically seen as being 'in tension' with professionalism (Ganesh & McAllum, 2012). They assign tasks based on volunteers' interests, rather than technical expertise, allowing members to act on their values. The value-rationale of volunteer organizations is said to establish a specific social bond amongst volunteers based on the belief in a collective mission. Shared social background (Vogt, 2009), values, and identities (Grönlund, 2011; O'Toole & Grey, 2016) create a sense of community, closeness, and friendship (Prouteau & Wolff, 2008). Typically, the encounter with clients or beneficiaries is grounded in the 'human touch' (Villadsen, 2009), authenticity, and compassion rather than professionalism (Milligan & Fyfe, 2016). As this synopsis shows, the ideal-types of bureaucracy and the grassroots volunteer organization sit at the extremes of an organizational spectrum (Table 1).

This spectrum depicts ideal-types, whose merit is heuristic. They are neither empirical realities nor normative claims; studies have shown that hybrid forms are common (e.g. Seibel, 2015). Especially when grassroots volunteer organizations grow or mature, they tend to become more bureaucratic – a tendency that has been described variously as

[1] The relation between professionalism and bureaucracy has been the subject of some debate. Some scholars have emphasized conflict between professional and bureaucratic norms, concluding that the concepts are antithetical (Freidson, 1973). Others have argued that Weber saw both professionalization and bureaucratization as complementary parts of an overarching rationalization process (Ritzer, 1975; Toren, 1976); in this view, an accountable, certified, and objective professional arises naturally in a bureaucratic environment (Adler, Kwon, & Heckscher, 2008; for a discussion see also Gittell & Douglass, 2012).

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