

The Power of Stupidity



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Chapter 12 The Stupidity of Bureaucracy

On this subject, I must confess, it's difficult for me to avoid the influence of a personal grudge. I often feel incompetent, and I am always uncomfortable, when dealing with any bureaucratic procedure. Of course there are more serious problems than the exasperating stupidity of bureaucracy. But few are so irritating, boring and frustrating as the the everyday hindrance of bureaucratic nonsense. Franz Kafka gave us a dramatically depressing picture of this disease ninety years ago. But things aren't getting any better.

The chronic and obstinate stupidity of bureaucracy isn't only despairingly "kafkian." It's a particularly obnoxious case of the stupidity of power – with all the awful effects that we have seen in chapter 10, and some more nasty twists of its own. Sometimes it has very serious, even catastrophic consequences. But even when the damage is less disastrous, it's a hideous persecution that forces us to waste time and commitment in all sorts of useless, cumbersome and unreasonable chores.

The root of the problem is that bureaucracy is dedicated to satisfying its own idiotic needs at the expense of the service that it's supposed to provide. And it's extremely conservative. It tends to repeat its routines even when they are useless or harmful, ignoring any consideration of practicality or common sense. It behaves like those stupid parasites that continue to pursue their invasive growth even when by doing so they risk maiming or killing the host – and therefore themselves.¹

¹ The "fable" of the scorpion and the frog explains how this sort of stupidity works. Some comments on this subject are online: gandalf.it/stupid/scorpion.htm

In other words – bureaucracy, when taken to its extreme consequences, is a terminal illness of any human society. But in many cases it cannot be radically removed, because such drastic surgery could hurt some healthy parts of the system, that unfortunately depend on bureaucracy for some part of their existence.

Like power, also bureaucracy cannot be totally eliminated. There is a need for someone to file, record, verify, as meticulously as necessary and also with an appropriate level of formality. But only small parts of the enormous resources employed by all sorts of bureaucratic systems are performing this task effectively.

Bureaucracy is generally perceived as a need (and a disease) of the “public sector.” But it can be just as powerful, and harmful, in privately owned companies. When routine prevails on efficiency, and formality replaces humanity, the entire organization loses purpose and perspective.

There are also dangerous “side effects.” When too many rules and regulations conflict with each other the result can be passive resignation – and a loss of discipline and commitment. *“Why should I bother to do a good job when I know that it will be vanquished by routine?”* If, by following a rule, one violates another, the result is increasing disorder – and corruption.

People start, maybe, with “forgetting” a silly rule and hoping that they won’t get caught. Once this becomes a habit, the basic concepts of integrity and good behavior can go to pot along with the bureaucratic nonsense. Over-regulated and formalistic societies, or organizations, often are also the most corrupt and dishonest – as well as incompetent and inefficient.

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Not all bureaucrats are ignorant, arrogant, dumb or stupid. I have met people at all levels in bureaucracies – from counter attendants to heads of large government departments – who are bright, human, sensible, kind, even personally pleasant and with a sense of humor. But their observations on the systems in which they work have made me even more unhappy.

There is something heroic in people who do good work in spite of a frustrating environment. Such as teachers who really teach – in a school system driven by other priorities.

Strange as this may seem, bureaucracy can be used well. When rules are well conceived, clear and simple, and sensibly applied, they can help to make things clear, to soften conflicts, to find an effective balance of personal freedom and social commitment. The real problem isn’t that bureaucracy exists, but that there is too much of it and it rarely works properly.

There should be some sort of therapy to replace bureaucratic stupidity with intelligence. In theory, it’s simple. A strong dose of common sense, to be administered frequently for a long time, with regular injections of civil responsibility, practical discipline and true public service motivation, continued obstinately as long as it takes to achieve durable results.

But in practice it’s very difficult. If one day a dedicated bunch of people will find a solution to this problem, they will deserve the gratitude of all humanity – or, at least, of that part of humanity that is lucky enough to live where their prescription is applied.