

Occupations and Professions in a Bureaucratized World

Since Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, sociologists have been interested in the organization and character of work. Modernity introduced both rampant industrialization and widespread bureaucratization, trends that continued throughout the twentieth century at a scale the founders of the discipline could not imagine. Undoubtedly, large, complex bureaucratic organizations undergird almost all of our greatest economic, social, political, technological, and scientific advances. It is difficult to imagine an occupational or professional field that is not touched, in some way, by bureaucracy. Yet such organization of work brings with it numerous costs: the irrationalities of bureaucratic rules and red tape, alienation from one's work and one's colleagues, the diffusion of practical and moral responsibility, the creation of perverse incentives, and more.

This course explores these classical sociological themes in the context of contemporary occupations and professions. We will draw on theoretical writings about the nature of work and the nature of bureaucratic organizations. We will then explore these ideas and themes in a variety of occupational and professional fields, such as education, business, social work, medicine, law, and craftwork. We will pay particular attention to the interaction between the work itself and the demands of the bureaucratic organization of that work. How do bureaucratic rules and structures enable people to accomplish more than they could ever hope to as individuals? How do bureaucratic rules and structures put limits on what people might do in their work? What does it mean to do a job well? How does the bureaucratic arrangement of work change people's incentives, their perceptions of their job, and their capacity to do their job well?

The goal of this course is for students to design and implement an original field-based research project on some occupation or profession of their own choosing. These research projects should explore the key themes and ideas covered in the course, with particular attention to how men and women in the particular profession or occupation navigate their day-to-day work experiences. Students will have the opportunity to engage in each step of the research process, from question formulation and data collection to analysis and write-up. Along the way we will have workshops on the process of conducting primary research and on each student's project. The methodological focus will be on field work (ethnographic observation and interviews).