

A Critical Review of Daniel Carpenter's *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy*

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Daniel Carpenter's *The Forging of Bureaucratic Authority: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928*¹ is a meticulously researched study of how executive agencies in the United States managed to forge bureaucratic autonomy during the period between the Civil War and the Great Depression. Via a historical comparative “narrative panel” analysis of two bureaucracies (pg. 35), the Post Office Department and the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Carpenter charts the emergence of the modern bureaucratic state and challenges the predominant narrative of Stephen Skowronek that the 19th century American state was composed exclusively of “courts and parties.”² This essay begins with a brief overview of Carpenter's theoretical framework and subsequently argues that while his narrative is compelling from the standpoint of positive theory, his account exposes significant problems from the standpoint of normative democratic theory that he neglects to address.

Bureaucracies, argues Carpenter, are political institutions, and subsequently their autonomy “arises when bureaucrats successfully practice a politics of legitimacy” (pg. 353). More specifically, Carpenter posits that “[b]ureaucratic autonomy prevails when a politically differentiated agency takes self-consistent action that neither politicians nor organized interests prefer but that they either cannot or will not overturn or constrain in the future” (pg. 17). He argues that politicians will only defer to bureaucracies with opposing goals if “(1) failure to do so would forfeit the publicly recognized benefits of agency capacity and/or (2) the agency can build coalitions around its innovations that make it costly for politicians to resist them” (ibid). In order to obtain such independent authority, the executive agency must first be “politically differentiated from the actors who seek to control them;” second, it must develop “unique organizational capacities” to gather/analyze information, experiment with new policies, and administer them with efficiency and without corruption; finally, it must construct “political legitimacy, or strong organizational reputations embedded in an independent power base” (pg. 14). To explain the evolution of the foregoing phenomena, Carpenter places particular emphasis

¹ Carpenter, Daniel. 2001. *The Forging of Bureaucratic Authority: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928*. Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press.

² Skowronek, Stephen. 1982. *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

on organizational variables. The mobilization and discretionary authority of the bureaucracy's "mezzo level," composed of "bureau or division chiefs, program planners, and monitors" (pg. 19) facilitates "experimental doing as well as inferential learning" (pg. 22). Agency leaders play an important role too; their hiring practices allow them "to mold bureaus according to their preferences," and their control over the politics of tenure "stabilizes any drift of agency preferences" (pg. 26). Further, by constructing support networks with actors and institutions outside the agency, bureaucratic leaders can cultivate "coalitions of diverse actors who value the agency services and who support agency moves" (pg. 31). Once an independent set of policy preferences has emerged, agency leaders and mid-level officials can foster a distinct agency culture that promotes the "cultural-socialization of career officials" (pg. 26). All this requires time and bureaucrats with long-enough time horizons to practice "the strategy of incrementalism" (pg. 31). The primary agencies Carpenter studies – the Post Office and the USDA – successfully practiced the politics of bureaucratic legitimacy: "Through reputation building," they compelled the legislature and President to assent to "greater and greater administrative innovation" (pg. 7). In contrast, other executive agencies, such as the Department of the Interior, failed to politically differentiate themselves and to nurture the bureaucratic culture necessary to attract talent. Consequently, they never recovered from being bled of autonomy and legitimacy by the Jacksonian spoils system. The Interior Department, writes Carpenter, "typified the clerical state [...] [it] left its most important decisions to newly hired clerks. It was a bureaucracy run neither by planning nor by expertise but by rote administration and clerical supervision" (pg. 56).

The main shortcoming of Carpenter's account is his unwillingness to derive normative lessons from his findings. He stalls and staggers, noting that "[t]he patterns of bureaucratic policy innovation observed in this narrative may or may not be praiseworthy" (pg. 367). He only tentatively tips the scales in the last sentence of his book, which strikes an optimistic tone: "[i]f the stories of statehood in this book offer promise, the challenge of American state building may be to reengage state bureaucracies with the very civic organizations and social networks in which they once flourished" (pg. 367). This conclusion would not be problematic were it not for the perturbing ways in which Carpenter's two 'successful' agencies "flourished" by forging and maintaining their bureaucratic autonomy.

First, consider the transformation of the Postal Office from the Jacksonian era through the latter periods of the Gilded Age. The Post Office, writes Carpenter, initially "embodied the Jacksonian equation of bureaucracy and clerkship," where "party loyalists flowed through postal jobs under the spoils system" largely undetected given the inability of Washington headquarters to monitor rural post offices and control the predominantly privatized delivery of mail (pg. 66). By the 1870s and 1880s, things began to change thanks to postal officers like Anthony Comstock,

a Connecticut-born “moral crusader” (pg. 66) who used the bureaucratic apparatus to cement alliances with agrarian and anti-vice Progressive organizations and mount a cultural campaign of moral cleansing and purging. As “[t]he Postal Office quickly became the moral arbiter of national culture,” Comstock and other postal officers organized to federally prosecute anybody they perceived to be responsible for society’s ills – those advocating for the “sexual intermingling of the classes,” those favoring “free love,” and those promoting abortion or distributing material deemed to be “lewd” or “obscene” (pgs. 84-85). Postal Office department leaders enthusiastically backed such efforts: “Washington officials detailed special agents to New York for Comstock’s cases, and Comstock used New York City postmasters as witnesses and interrogators in many of his arrests” (pgs. 85-86). The Postal Service was beginning to forge bureaucratic autonomy – its mid-level officers were mobilizing and experimenting with ‘progressive’ policies, constructing alliances with increasingly influential anti-vice organizations, building a bureaucratic culture in which new members would be socialized, and fostering a reputation deemed legitimate by the socially conservative Gilded Age public.

But what was the price of such a transformation? Surely the Postal Office and Comstock’s efforts contributed to the legitimation of some of the darkest social experiments in American history undertaken in the first two decades of the 20th century – a period during which the Post Office had remained “the central player” in “the Progressive moral reform movement” (pg. 144). The eugenics movement, for example, grew out of a popular desire (backed by the very “conservative physicians” that Carpenter notes were some of the Post Office’s biggest supporters (pg. 149)) for policies that would experiment with demographic engineering and purge society of ‘undesirables’. The Supreme Court’s infamous *Buck v. Bell* case upholding the constitutionality of forcibly sterilizing mentally disabled persons may be seen as the dark triumph of this line of misguided policymaking. Anti-vice crusaders similarly promoted perhaps the biggest policy failure in American history – Prohibition - by forging a coalition that secured the passage of the 18th Amendment banning the sale, production, and transportation of alcoholic beverages for thirteen years. Once again, prohibitionists were central players in the Post Office’s support coalition (pg. 149). If a “key component” of the Post Office’s “march to autonomy” was its “linkages to Victorian moral reformers and its anti-adulteration campaigns,” may we not ask whether Skowronek’s ‘amoral’ 19th century state of “courts and parties,” with its comparatively weak Postal Office, would be preferable to a bureaucratic state forged on corrupted moral premises?

There is more. Consider the case of the USDA: In the 1910s, writes Carpenter, it achieved a massive increase in public legitimacy and policymaking influence by solidifying its “cross-regional and cross-class foundations in Progressive American society,” building ties with

major agricultural research institutions (UC-Berkeley's College of Agriculture and the Citrus Experiment Station at Riverside), and developing a departmental "program of economic analysis and planning" which gained significant influence in "social scientific circles" (pgs. 292-295). It thus "took its place as the central representative organ of American agriculture" (pg. 291). The USDA's policymaking influence became evident when it "succeeded in boosting [agricultural] production" during the First World War, which contributed to large agricultural surpluses (pgs. 311-312). Yet by the close of the War these surpluses generated significant price disparities and led to an economic crisis that plunged the country into a two-year recession (ibid). Nevertheless, "by 1920, the department's reputation as the paternal organization of American agriculture [...] was firm," and "[w]hereas politicians and parties paid dearly for the postwar depression, the Department of Agriculture did not" (ibid). In fact, most farmers "felt that the USDA could save them from financial distress" (pg. 313). The irony of farmers seeking aid from one of the very institutions responsible for their woes is telling. Bureaucratic autonomy, in this case, clouded the perceptions of American farmers and placed "the onus for the apparent price disparities" not "on the department, but on elected officials and private institutions" (pg. 312). If, as Carpenter argues, "[b]ureaucratic policymaking is the hallmark of modern American government," then such serious side-effects of bureaucratic autonomy cannot be discounted. Bureaucratic independence may well provide the insulation necessary to produce sound public policies – but should it instead protect poor policymaking from democratic accountability, then the moral hazard and democratic deficit problems engendered would be very serious indeed.

In short, Carpenter's narrative begs the question: if bureaucracies are neither directly accountable to the public (a truism in the literature) nor to the legislature and the President (the underexplored phenomenon Carpenter explicates), what is to constrain the bureaucratic state to its constitutionally mandated democratic bounds? What is to ensure that the interests of public officers are sufficiently aligned with American society to incentivize the bureaucratic provision of public goods? Indeed, even when such alignment occurs, Carpenter reminds us that it often arises thanks to the ability of "autonomous agencies [to] shift electoral and representative preferences" (pg. 357). Carpenter's narrative thus undermines the claims of principal-agent theory, for the agents (bureaucracies) may do more than 'drift' away from their principals' preferences; they may "change the terms of the delegation" itself by bringing "political legitimacy to bear upon the very laws that give them power" (pg. 17). But Carpenter forgets that such dynamics do not simply challenge what the *positively-minded* principal-agent theorists have postulated – they also run counter to what the *normatively-minded* Founding Fathers envisioned when they institutionalized a system of checks and balances by promulgating the American Constitution. For Carpenter, the latter would be equally worthy interlocutors.