Weber’s task in both “Bureaucracy” and “Class, Status, Party” is to describe a society that is both democratic and capitalist. Taking these characteristics into account, he seeks to understand how power is granted (via class, status, and party) and organized (via bureaucracy). He sees the relationship between democracy, capitalism, and bureaucracy as complicated and multi-directional, sometimes fostering one another, sometimes acting in opposition. In his essay entitled “Class, Status, Party” Weber starts from the assumption that the manner in which a society is organized is determined by how power of all kinds is distributed. He outlines how classes, status groups, parties are organized, their internal typologies, the distinctions between them, and their relationships. In his essay entitled “Bureaucracy, Weber turns his attention to how power is organized and sustained through the workings of the bureaucratic machine.

In “Class, Status, Party,” Weber asserts that class influences the life chances of people. Class groups are defined as sharing a component of economic interest that is based on the group members’ possession of goods or sources of income taking place in the commodity or labor markets (Economy and Society, 927). People who meet in the market are divided according to whether they are propertied or property-less, along with the nature of property one owns or services one offers in case he is without property. Therefore, the class situations of the people in the market are relatively diversified. From this diversity, Weber argues, comes a diversity of interests. As Weber states, class interest is a "factual direction of interests following with a certain probability from the
class situation for a certain average of those people subjected to the class situation” (E&S, 929). In other words, Weber asserts that an individual will make decisions as to join a certain social action based on his specific class situation and specific economic interest. This idea is directly in contrast to Marx’s conception of two classes which have inherent conflicting interests. For Weber, class situation can lead to similar reactions of people that share it but by no means would necessarily cause a revolution between the propertied and property-less classes. Instead, Weber hypothesizes that class antagonisms are likely to spring up among those that directly participate as opponents in price.

Weber offers a second, more explicit modification on Marx’s ideas concerning class and power. Weber asserts that class is not the only factor in the ordering of social groups. Instead, the distribution of social honor between various groups in a community, or their relative “status” positions, also determine social order. Status is manifest through the life styles of different groups. Although life style is conditioned by economic resources, economic resources alone do not determine status. Weber illustrates this point by giving examples of how many highly valued social groups despise economic activity. The relationship between class and status is not unidirectional, however. Status groups can also hinder the working of the market through monopolization of certain goods. The concepts of and distinctions between class and status group become crucial to an understanding of how societies are organized in these overlapping and reciprocally-determined orders.

“Parties,” as Weber terms them, are formed to influence class and status groups into discrete social actions. Unlike status and class groups, parties are goal oriented. In order to achieve goals parties function within groups with associational character. These
groups are ordered and have means of enforcement that are needed for rational social action. Parties can be constituted from people in different class or status situations and can provide a basis for obtainment of social honor or economic power. Again, the relationship between parties, class, and status seem to be multi-directional.

Weber asserts that these powered relationships are sustained within the capitalist, democratic society by the bureaucratic machine. In discussing the factors that foster bureaucracy, Weber focuses on two conditions: the presence of a money economy and the process of social and economic leveling. These two factors do not directly cause the development of bureaucratic structures, nor are they sufficient pre-conditions; Weber does argue, though, that they are present where bureaucracies flourish. He argues that this is the genius of bureaucracy; though its goals sometimes come into direct conflict with capitalism and democracy, it provides a system that can guarantee the stability of a society as a whole. As he states, “bureaucracy is the means of transforming social action into rationally organized action.”

The smooth running of a bureaucracy depends on several factors. First, bureaucracy requires regular, stable income. Weber argues that this is most easily accomplished through a system of taxation in a pecuniary economy. A natural economy, dependent on serfs or slave labor, could not guarantee the type of regular income that taxation from a money economy grants to the bureaucratic structure. Second, a bureaucracy necessarily depends on the replacement of an honorific or charismatic leader with a series of rules, routines, and predictabilities. In a bureaucracy, the worker’s commitment is not to a particular leader, but to the mission and function of the institution.
in which he is situated. The managers of bureaucratic institutions command authority, but they draw that authority from a commitment to keeping the machine running.

As such, a bureaucracy is characterized by fixed rules and routines, managed and monitored by salaried employees who have specialized training and are considered to have expertise. These employees work in a physical office, using documents, files, and accounting procedures as the tools of their trade. Their office is their vocation, demanding their full working capacity. Contrasted with the notion of the laborer punching a time clock, this conception of the worker blends his professional and personal identities. The worker in a bureaucracy expects to advance up the career ladder, with his compensation rising in accord with his position, his seniority, and his technical expertise. As Weber states, “the fully developed bureaucratic apparatus compares with other organizations exactly as does the machine with the non-mechanical modes of production. Precision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs—these are raised to the optimum point in the strictly bureaucratic administration…” From this extreme form of rationalism, a new rational society is produced. Education becomes specialized and expertise-generating. Training is geared toward certification exams, as opposed to general cultural learners. Workers are salaried and expected to be committed to this rational machine for life.

If indeed Weber is trying to understand how power is organized in the modern capitalist, democratic society, he gives us a rather clear ideal-type. In short, power is no longer captured by a charismatic, honorific leader, but is embodied in the rational manner of the bureaucracy. As he suggests, modern citizens serve the bureaucracy just as pre-
modern people served their gods. Unlike religious or charismatic systems of control, however, the bureaucratic machine can be used to regulate any ideological system. It is the essence of anti-ideological, though Weber emphasizes that it works well to sustain a capitalist society.

Weber offers a pragmatic, complex, and comprehensive model of how societies are organized. One of its major strengths is that Weber advances a multi-causal theory of how societies are arranged (there is not one major factor, such as economic, as in Marx). We are left with the unanswered question of whether Weber seeks to comment on the social forms he describes. More than anything else, Weber is concerned with defining an ideal-type, rather than concerning himself with criticizing how society is organized. It is hard to discern his ideological position in regard to the phenomena he catalogues. In his discussion of the impact of bureaucracy on education, however, he lets slip his nostalgia for an era when “cultivated man…is understood to mean solely that the goal of education consists in the quality of a man’s bearing in life rather than in specialized training in expertness.” Is Weber, in fact, mournful about the “cogs” that we have all become, or is he mesmerized by order, rationality and sustainability?

Note: Law and legal order are left somewhat unexplained in Weber’s analysis of power distribution. Weber explicitly assigns the role of “guarantor” to the legal order vis-à-vis the social and the economic orders and states that “the structure of every legal order directly influences the distribution of power, economic or otherwise, within its respective community.” (E&S 929) Weber argues that law directly influences how power is distributed. But what are the sources and the legitimacy of the law?