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Bureaucratization in *The Lord of the Rings*

**Abstract**

Discusses the rise of bureaucratic organization in the Third Age as a response to denser population and the needs of war and administration; considers the pitfalls and advantages of bureaucratic organization and Tolkien's attitudes towards it.

**Additional Keywords**

In Tolkien's day, as well as in our own, it seemed good sense to oppose the bureaucratization of human life and to deplore the destructive results of bureaucratic technology. In the fantasy world which Tolkien envisioned, man (and all the speaking peoples) could potentially live in harmony with each other and thus needed no organizing force beyond Nature and an individual commitment to the "Good". Consequently most of his people, hobbits in particular, live without any bureaucracies or formal organizations of any sort.

The bureaucracy, like other forms of social organization, is goal oriented. Some definite productive purpose characterizes every bureaucracy, even if that purpose is to produce a body count or a set amount of destruction. Bureaucracy is a formal attempt to organize the actions of a group of individuals. It parcels out power and specifies tasks so that the greater goals of the group can be accomplished. Bureaucracy is defined by a hierarchy which designates a system of superiors and subordinates in the power structure, and by a set of rules, which structure activities of individuals in the group and create specialization of work. In a typical bureaucracy everyone knows what to do and to whom to report. People doing the right thing for the right people are praised; all others are ignored or condemned. Sociologists like Max Weber believe that as societies become more complex (with more disunity and diversity of opinion) this form of organization tends to supplant more primitive types of authority such as traditional leadership, based on heredity and family ties, or charismatic leadership, based on a single dynamic personality.

Tolkien felt that bureaucracy was dehumanizing and demeaning, and he consistently associates it with "Evil". In the works about Middle Earth he implies that bureaucracy was bred in the darkness. The worst possible people-Hogorth, Sauron-are the best organized. Nevertheless, Tolkien's story admits that bureaucracy plays an integral part in the struggle for good in Middle Earth. Those who are ignorant of bureaucratic principles become slaves and those who neglect bureaucratic practice fail in their purpose.

Most of the people at the end of the Third Age live in isolated, loosely-organized groups which lack even simple trade agreements. In consequence these groups frequently lose contact with each other. The Silvan Elves don't know whether the High Elves still live in Middle Earth (I,352); the dwarves are sundered from their kindred for long years. And the hobbits don't know where anyone is.

Bureaucratization is almost non-existent among hobbits. Instead they employ traditional leadership. "The Shire at this time had hardly any 'government'. Families for the most part managed their own affairs." Hobbits lived according to an oral tradition which they must have learned by rote, along with such skills as animal husbandry and metallurgy as it has descended from the Númenóreans: "There remained, of course, the ancient tradition concerning the high king of Fornost (and the hobbits) attributed to the king of old all their essential laws; and usually they kept the laws of free will, because they were The Rules (as they said), both ancient and just." Even their defense forces (Hobbitry-in-arms) had been allowed to lapse (I,18).

The other peoples exhibited varying degrees of disorganization. Elves were semi-nomadic people governed by a hereditary tribal leadership. Elf leaders resemble the chiefs of the American Plains Indians who lead by example, persuading rather than compelling. Dwarves are better organized, with kingdoms and trade interests, but they were not numerous and not inclined to open their organizations to outsiders.

The best administrators in Middle Earth are the Men of Númenor. Assembling that mammoth fleet for the assault on the Undying Lands (Akallabeth, 277) required administrative ability. The Númenóreans established empires and taught other men in Middle Earth to govern themselves. Even in its decline the last Númenórean Kingdom of Gondor still showed signs of bureaucratic organization in its more able rulers. Faramir, for example, governs his guerilla force with a stern hand, strictly enforcing every rule, except in the most unusual circumstances. I think that one of the reasons that Sauron got on so well with the Númenóreans (Akallabeth, 271) was their common interest in bureaucracy.

Sauron is very well organized—he has to be! Consider the nature of the individuals on whom he must rely: the orc is treacherous, cruel, greedy, foul-tempered, destructive and easily frightened. Trolls are worse. The men in Sauron's service are surly, cowardly and mean. Who could work with a crew like that? Only a very good administrator.

Sauron's forces at the Seige of Gondor provide an excellent example of what a bureaucracy can do with even the most middling material. The army of the Nazgul bests the City's defenders time and again. Gondor is saved only by a miracle. The Siege of Gondor is probably the shortest siege in history. The Nazgul breach the first circle of the city in 12 hours. A Medieval analogy might be the Seige of Constantinople in 1453. That walled city withstood the Turks for 55 days under very similar circumstances.

Before the gate of Minas Tirith the orcs and
trolls fight dutifully. Even when "the ground was choked with writhing and the very plain; yet still driven as by a madness more powerful than I thought came up." When a crazed elephant "spread stamping ruin among the orcs innumerable...their bodies were cast aside from its path and others took their place" (III, 102). If this activity is indeed due to "madness", it is extremely well organized insanity.

The defenders within the City do not agit themselves nearly as well. Fires now raged unchecked in the first circuit of the City as the garrison upon the outer wall was already in many places cut off from retreat. But the faithful who remained at their posts were few; most had fled beyond the second gate" (III, 98). On his way to the battle Pippin met a "boiling back from the burning". Poor Beregond is not the only one of the defenders who should have been tried for the treason of leaving his post.

Minas Tirith's gate is thrown down largely because the defenders are not bureaucratized. When a crisis separates them from their traditional leaders, the people of Minas Tirith don't know what to do or who to obey. When the Lord of the Nazgul is destroyed the next official in the bureaucratic chain of command, the Gorthor takes control of the enemy forces and the battle goes on. But when Denethor lays down his traditional authority and his only surviving heir, Faramir, cannot succeed him, the city is left without adequate leadership. An attempt is made to appoint a temporary "charismatic" leader (Gandalf/Mithrandir) but Denethor's messengers inform him "Not all will follow Mithrandir. Men are flying from the walls and leaving them unmanned" (III, 98). There is even an unthinkable clash between the body guard and the soldiery in the hollows of Rath Dinen. The City stands in disarray while the battle is almost lost a second time when Aragorn's Fleet is sighted. Men "ran to the bells and tolled the alarm; and some blew the trumpets sounding the retreat. 'Back to the Walls!' they cried. 'Back to the Walls!'"

Fortunately the miracle-bringing South Wind "blew all their clamour away" (III, I22). Only this wind saved them from the consequences of having no proper bureaucratic structure.

Of course Tolkien makes a strong case for fearing bureaucracy; like all tokens of power, it must be used with care and wisdom or it can cause great harm. He suggests that if Sauron's organization had been a little better he would have won. Close examination reveals that the orcs were not bureaucratized! The most costly mistakes made by Sauron's forces occur when orc leaders of equal rank encounter each other with conflicting orders. Merry and Pippin are taken across the plain of Rohan in stead of being whisked off to Mordor because Sauron's officer, Grishnákh, is forced to give way to Saruman's orc leader, Uglúk. In a strict bureaucratic hierarchy it would have been clear that Sauron's official was to be obeyed. The entire Quest is later rescued in a bloody manner when two orcs cut off a section of Frodo's mithril shirt. Again it is clear who should prevail. Shagrat obeys Sauron's orders to keep the prisoner and his things intact, but Gollum, the Morgul orc, turns renegade and tries to steal the shirt. Finally, when Frodo and Sam both fall into Enemy hands, a mix-up over precedence on entering the plain of Udun frees them and places them on the very road to the Dark Tower and Mount Doom. If Sauron had spent some of his time organizing a good organizational analysis, he might have saved himself a lot of grief. He was penny wise and pound foolish (II, 100).

Aside from these helpful mistakes, the only way the people of Middle Earth are able to effectively combat evil is through some fundamental bureaucratizing. The "Scouring of the Shire" stands as an excellent example. Farmer Cotton observes that "we can master them (the ruffians), if we stick together". But no one in the Shire knows how to "stick together". Only the Travelers, who have been apprenticing in Southern Wars have the administrative skills to save the day. ("That is what we have been trained for...")

A well structured bureaucracy can be used to a good or ill effect, depending on the purpose of the user. But a badly designed bureaucracy, such as Saruman created in the Shire is harmful to everyone—even its maker. Tolkien would have us believe that Saruman's "organization" of the Shire with the lahumalous machines and surplus of police, is the prototype of bureaucracy. In fact it is the very worst stereotype— one made up of petty demagoguery and rules which serve no purpose. As we have seen at the Seige of Minas Tirith bureaucracy is a most hardy and useful form of organization. In a percent hierarchy there can be no lack of leadership since every individual (except the one on the bottom) has a position of authority; a perfect set of rules leaves no task undone or any doubt in the minds of the doers. This is all very useful when there is a crisis or an immediate danger. Why then did Tolkien dislike true bureaucracy so much? He explains it very clearly through his identification with the Elves.

The Elves are the first children of Eru—people of the Twilight—who knew Middle Earth when it was still a place of harmony and unity. After the treachery of Morgoth and the killing of the Two Trees, this harmony was shattered forever (The Silmarillion. 75-79). Morgoth reunited selected parts of Middle Earth and reorganized them for his own purposes using the most powerful tool available—bureaucracy. The Free Peoples were forced to do the same in order to organize resistance against him. Yet this entire enterprise—organizing, fighting, submerged individual goals for the good were fought totally against the nature of the Elves and Tolkien). Elven souls desire to learn and teach, live and let live. Therefore, they ignore evil when they can, prefer to leave the fighting to others and unite only at great need, as in the Battle before Thangorodrim or at the Last Alliance Elrond (who is quite notably Halflven in this instance) laments that the Elves lose interest after each apparent victory. Time and again they fail to follow-up their advantages. The Enemy reorganizes and returns (I, 256).

Tolkien does not specifically state that Morgoth invented bureaucracy, although he certainly made it necessary. Morgoth did not, for instance, teach Elves or men any administrative skills (although the Númeróreans may have perfected them under Sauron). Therefore it is reasonable to assume that bureaucracy is a naturally occurring solution to the problem of disharmony and disunity. Men seem to be better constituted than Elves to manage a great bureaucracy. The day to day goals, for men (like the Entwves) aim at artificially controlling and ordering others about.

Thus the fourth Age, an age which must put together the fragmented pieces of Middle Earth, will be the Age of Men—a time of bureaucracy used for good purposes. Aragorn is charged with the
bureaucratization of Middle Earth. To do this he recognizes areas like the West March and estab-
ishes hierarchy so that the governing authorities of the colonies are answerable to him. With the
help of the palantír he reestablishes communication throughout its realms reopening roads and per-
sonally visiting various provinces. He replaces tradition with new laws (one of which forbids Men
to enter the Shire) and establishes embassies with foreign lands. He holds Pippin to his vows as a
knight of Gondor and sends him out as an agent to the Shire, even as Sauron and Saruman once sent
their agents. But this time the purpose is for
good rather than evil. The extent to which
Aragorn's kingdom will be a successes will be
designed largely by his ability to rule justly
through chosen subordinates, create effective laws
and integrate the diverse peoples in his kingdom;
in a word, to bureaucratic effectively.

It is conventional wisdom that the ends do
not justify the means. It is also true that the
ends do not condemn the means. Bureaucratic means
provide a great strength which the inhabitants
of Tolkien's world turn to good ends as often as
bad ones.

THREE LETTERS BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS
NOTED BY J.R. CHRISTOPHER

In the summer of 1977 I spent two weeks work-
ing at the Humanities Research Center at the Un-
iversity of Texas, Austin, mainly concerned with pre-
paring notes of the Dorothy L. Sayers manuscripts
there. Sunday evening before the first Monday I
was to spend in the library, I relocated the building
(I had been there just once before) and found a
display of fantasy works in the lobby, including
the manuscript of G.K. Chesterton's The Man Who Was
Thursday. (Appropriately enough for fantasy works,
the display vanished—having been up for two weeks,
I was told—between Monday morning and noon on my
first day in the library.) Later, when I was dis-
cussing the display with Wendell Wagner, Jr., a
fellow Mythopoeic Society member who was working
in the H.R.C. that summer, he mentioned that the
rest of the display, unseen by me on an upper floor,
had included a letter or two by J.R.R. Tolkien.
Delighted with the chance of holding some of Tol-
ken's manuscripts in my hands, I worked in time to
look at his letters; there were three of them, and
I made the following descriptions.

1. To John Masefield (1878-1967). Dated Friday,
   14 July (no year). Handwritten (actually printed, as Tolkien normally did) on both
   sides of a small piece of grey stationery, with Tolkien's Oxford address (20 North-
   moor Road) and telephone number printed at the top; signed.

   Tolkien writes apologetically because he has
   missed the deadline for the program (of the
   year's Oxford Summer Diversions); he had
   looked through The Canterbury Tales
   and some of Gower (probably Confessio
   Amantis, since it is in English) for some-
   thing suitable and then had to grade some
   Civil Service papers. Last night he fin-
   ally worked out the reading: either the
   same as the previous year, or a cut version
   of "The Reeve's Tale" with one revised
   link for one passage cut and with the Nor-
   thern dialect as worked out in Tolkien's
   article.

   Comment: this letter belongs to 1939, for that
   was the year Tolkien recited "The Reeve's
   Tale" from memory at the Summer Diversions;
   the previous year he had done "The Nun's
   Priest's Tale" (Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien:
   A Biography [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Com-
pany, 1977], p. 214). Tolkien's article
   referred to it in the letter as "Chaucer
   as a Philologist: The Reeve's Tale", in
   Transactions of the Philological Society
   (1938), pp. 1-70. The lines proposed for
cutting in the reading were 11. 57-66, 257-
   352 (with a supplied link), 363-364, and
   397-398.

2. To Terence Tiller (1916— ). Dated 2 Novem-
   ber 1956. Handprinted on both sides of a
   piece of stationery with Tolkien's Oxford
   address (79 Sandfield Road, Headington)
   and phone number at the top; signed. Two
   pencil lines on the back side opposite a
   comment about the Rohirrim.

   Tolkien thanks Tiller for copies of the first
   three scripts (of Tiller's adaptation of
   The Lord of the Rings for B.B.C. radio);
   Tolkien replies to a question about accents,
   indicating he does not think modern dia-
eglects, such as Cockney, should be used to
caracterize species, such as Orcs; in
   particular, none of the inhabitants of
   Minas Tirith—since it was the source and
   standard of Common Speech—would have
   accents; the Rohirrim might speak the Com-
mom Speech somewhat carefully, as a learn-
ed language, but even that is not always
   true, for Théoden was born in Gondor, etc.

   Handprinted on both sides of the same type
   of stationery as in (2); signed.

   Tolkien has now read the three scripts and finds
   them clear; but, privately, he asks Tiller
   what the point is of condensing The Lord
   of the Rings into such a cramped form when
   the book needs more time; he points to
   several episodes which have been overly
   condensed in this handling, and regrets
   that the form could not have been more
   narrative and less dramatic.

   Comment: Tolkien is on record against the use
   of fairy material in stage plays ('On
   Fairy-stories', in Tree and Leaf [London:
   George Allen and Unwin, 1964], 46-48, 67-
   68); but he does not comment on radio
   drama, which is a partly narrative form
   in its use of an announcer to set scenes and
   bridge between dialogues.