Staff and Status in international bureaucracies: a Weberian perspective on the EU civil service

Paper presented at the ECPR General Conference
Charles University in Prague (7 - 10 September 2016)

Section:
21st Century International Organizations: New Challenges and New Dynamics

Panel:
Bureaucratic Autonomy in International Organizations
Staff and Status in international bureaucracies: a Weberian perspective on the EU civil service

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Abstract: Recent studies in IR have devoted little systematic attention to the personnel of international organisations. This article argues that the works of Max Weber could provide an orientation for future research on the cohesion and autonomy of the staff in international bureaucracies. In his writings, Weber highlights the role of bureaucratic officials as an ‘occupational status group’ or Berufsstand distinguished by their professional ethics, privileged positions, practices of social closure and a particular style of life, which is expressed in a claim to social prestige. Weber suggests a sociological analysis of bureaucratic staff, whose group character is determined by their occupation and profession. The article outlines Weber’s understanding of the administrative official by revisiting his seminal sociological and political writings. The added value of Weber’s conception for IR is demonstrated with an empirical sketch of the EU civil service, which can be analysed as a transnational status group in the making.

Introduction

For more than a decade, research in International Relations (IR) has renewed attention on the impact of international organisations on global politics. International organisations, such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Health Organisation, are capable of constructing problems and actors, fixing meanings to orient action and diffusing norms. They are influential and powerful actors in world politics (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 31-34). Scholars have also emphasised the importance of staff, as the last 20 years have seen a steady growth of the personnel of international secretariats which accompanies the expansion of global bureaucracies (Mathiason 2007, 128; Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 158-166). This growing corpus of international civil servants plays a critical role for the organisational culture, institutional memory, effectiveness and overall legitimacy of international organisations (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 5; Mathiason 2008, 128; Yi-chong and Weller 2008; Benner et al 2011, 14-16; Weiss 2011, 25-42). In short, ‘people matter’, as Thomas Weiss concludes from a comprehensive study on global governance and the politics of international organisations (Weiss 2011). This is especially salient regarding the autonomy of international organisations.

The questions of whether or not international organisations have bureaucratic autonomy and the extent to which they act independently of state interests have long been debated in IR. Identifying the bases of that autonomy is crucial for an understanding of the power and pathologies of international organisations (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 4, 16). To act autonomously, bureaucracies must have a high degree of insulation from other actors in a political system, such as elected authorities, organised interests or societal groups in order to ‘take sustained patterns of action consistent with their own wishes’ (Carpenter 2001, 14). One central source for the autonomy is the bureaucratic staff’s own characteristics, namely its social cohesion and common organisational culture. Similar career patterns, homogeneous preferences, shared professional norms and a sense of group solidarity set the staff apart from other actors and give it strong capacities for autonomous bureaucratic action. Thus, determining the existence or absence of these group aspects is particularly relevant if one is to assess the autonomy of international bureaucracies. Yet, our knowledge about these staff characteristics is still limited. Little systematic

1 Forthcoming in Cambridge Review of International Affairs (2016). The presentation is based on this paper and aims at developing further research ideas. Comments are very welcome.
2 For a survey of the recent literature on international organisations see Bauer and Weinlich (2011); Bueger and Heßelmann (2011) and the various contributions in Reinalda (2013).
research has so far been done on the personnel working in international organisations (Yi-chong and Weller 2008, 36).  

This article argues that the work of Max Weber is a useful starting point in order to get a better grasp of the organisational culture of the staff of international organisations that allows assessing their capacity for autonomous action. Max Weber is conventionally thought of as a founding father of the realist approach to international relations (Smith 1986, 23-53). Fred Halliday even terms him the ‘radix malorum’ of a determinist view of the relation of state to international relations (Halliday 2002, 248). However, the relevance of Weber’s political sociology goes beyond a contribution to realist theories of IR (Hobson 2002; Lawson and Shilliam 2010, 75-77). This holds particularly for the debate on international organisations. Most of the modern literature on organisations is rooted in Weber’s seminal writings about bureaucracy (Clegg 1994).

The same applies to the literature on international secretariats. Current research in IR starts in many ways from Max Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy and its central notions such as rule-bound behaviour, formal rationality, expert knowledge or impersonal authority (Bueger and Heßelmann 2011, 93-94). Weber’s ideal type has become a convenient starting point in IR for analyzing the power and influence of international organisations and has found its way into various studies. Nevertheless, the potential of his work for a better understanding of the personnel of these organisations has not yet been fully explored.  

The aim of this article is to gain a fuller comprehension of Weber’s concept of bureaucratic officials in order to examine its relevance for the theory and analysis of international bureaucracies. To do so requires an engagement with Weber’s sociological and political writings. Weber is well-known for his ideal type understanding of bureaucracy, with which he emphasises the functional and instrumental role of the administrative official in the machine of the bureaucratic apparatus. However, he also highlights other aspects of the official, namely their responsibilities, practical rationality and ethics in the ‘life order’ of the bureau (du Gay 2009, 149; Beetham 1974, 15-16). This is the basis for Weber’s understanding of bureaucracy as ‘status’ or ‘status group’ (Stand), which is distinguished by a claim to social prestige. Weber develops the theoretical understanding of status in ‘Economy and Society’, while in his political writings, he also relates this notion to bureaucracy to highlight the separateness and exclusiveness of bureaucratic officials in modern society. According to Weber, the administrative staff can be conceived of as an ‘occupational status group’ (Berufsstand), which is characterised by its educational qualifications, the striving for privileged positions, practices of social closure and a particular ‘conduct of life’. This is a seldom noted but important aspect of Weber’s conception of bureaucratic officials that allows for an understanding of the internal bonds and external boundaries of these officials as a group. Weber suggests a perspective, which also opens up new lines of inquiry for a better grasp of the internal cohesion, autonomy and power of the staff of international organisations.

The article is structured as follows: The first section delineates Weber’s theory of the bureaucratic official. It begins with Weber’s notion of office holding as a vocation, which requires ‘professional duty’ and ‘ethical discipline’. This leads to Weber’s concept of bureaucracy as an occupational status group, set apart by their preferential social opportunities and social prestige. The next section presents an illustrative case study to show the empirical relevance of Weber’s concept of status group for studies of bureaucratic personnel in IR. This section gives an

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3 Recent exceptions include Goetz and de Guevara (2012); Anderfuhrten-Biget et al (2013); Georgakakis (2013a, b) as well as studies on the role of the United Nations Secretary-General, which, however, only focus on the most visible top bureaucratic position in global politics (Chesterman 2007; Myint-U and Scott 2007; Gordenker 2010).

4 Against the background of the contemporary practice of international organisations, the debate in IR would also profit from critical discussion of Weber’s framework. There is a body of critical literature on Weberian views of bureaucracy (Clegg and Lounsbury 2009, 120-122). It is clear that Weber’s notion of bureaucracy is not beyond reproach. However, there are also many misunderstandings about Weber’s concepts and his method. I have no space here to go into this debate or to address these various criticisms. Hence, although the general argument of this article is that Weber’s concepts can usefully be applied to IR, I do not intend to contradict specific critics of Weber’s view of the bureaucracy.
An empirical sketch of the European Union’s civil service and focuses on the evolution and formation of this group. The rather limited aim here is to show that the civil service of the European Union can fruitfully be studied, using Weber’s categories, as a transnational status group in the making. The section ends with a short discussion on what this implies for the capacities of the EU officials to act in an autonomous fashion. The conclusion takes up the question of the value of Weber’s work and discusses how a re-reading of Weber’s work might possibly enrich IR-theory.

Max Weber’s theory of bureaucratic officials revisited

Weber conceptualises rational bureaucracies as composed of trained officials and refers to them either as the specific group which comprises the civil service or the total body of officials who work in administration in all areas of society (Beetham 1974, 65). Moreover, Weber offers two somewhat different, but related, views of the administrative official.

The first is a rather functionalist account, which figures prominently in ‘Economy and Society’ and which is more familiar to scholars in political science and IR. Weber conceives of the official as a specific type of personality, demanded and shaped by bureaucracy. Bureaucratisation strongly promotes the specialist, the professional and technical expert (Weber 1978, 988). Weber understands this as the development of cognitive structures, which allow for adequate action within the organisation and an environment structured by organisations. The emphasis here is on the instrumentalisation and disciplining of the self, the identification with a given function through the development of a bureaucratic habitus (Breuer 1991, 211-213). In this context, Weber depicts bureaucracy through the metaphor of a ‘living machine’ (Weber 1994, 158). The individual in this machine is ‘only a small cog in ceaselessly moving mechanism, which prescribes to him an essentially fixed route of march.’ (Weber 1978, 988) The official is oriented to a specific function and functionally limited expert knowledge (Breuer 1991, 211). Administrative officials are hierarchically organised and subject to strict obedience and discipline. For Weber, obedience means ‘that the action of the person obeying follows in essentials such a course that the content of the command may be taken to have become the basis of action for its own sake.’ (Weber 1978, 215) According to Weber, this refers solely to the formal obligation ‘without regard to the actor’s own attitude to the value or lack of value of the content of the command as such.’ (Weber 1978, 215) The precondition for such obedience is discipline, which Weber understands as the methodically prepared and exact execution of the received order, in which all personal criticism is suspended and the actor is exclusively set for carrying out the command (Weber 1978, 1149). The second view of the bureaucratic official highlights other aspects, namely the practical rationality and ethical seriousness of the official (du Gay 2009, 149). This is a less-known aspect of Weber’s writings on bureaucracy and it needs to be explained in more detail.

The ethics of the official

In the ‘Economic Ethics of the World Religions’, Weber outlines different value spheres such as economy, politics or religion (Weber 1949, 323-359). Weber highlights the ideational or cultural dimension of these spheres, each of which is constituted by specific orientational standards and the particular meaning, which the actors take as a basis for their orientation to each other. Every
value sphere also has an institutional dimension, which is central to Weber’s deliberations in ‘Economy and Society’. Weber understands the institutionalised form of a value sphere as a ‘life order’ or Lebensordnung. Each life order comprises distinct carriers (Träger) with specific ideal and material interests, such as professions, organisations and social groups, and exhibits its own forms of organised rationality. Moreover, a particular ‘conduct of life’ or Lebensführung corresponds to each life order. 6 This term refers to the ability and disposition of persons to conduct or direct their lives in a conscious methodical-rational way. Every individual is suited to existence within a particular life order, which places ethical demands on the personality and practical-rational forms of conduct. The individual must be capable of personal dedication to the instituted purposes of the life order and have the practical techniques for living a given conduct of life (cf. Hennis 1988).

Weber does not explicitly outline bureaucracy as a life order or as a particular way of conducting one’s life. However, there are several hints in his work that allow us to do so. In the ‘Protestant Ethics’, Weber develops his central thought that one of the constituent parts of the spirit of capitalism is the rational life conduct on the basis of the idea of a calling or vocation (Berufsidee). In his writings, Weber has elaborated only two examples for a particular conduct of life on such a basis, namely in his vocational lectures ‘Science as a Vocation’ and ‘Politics as a Vocation’. For Weber, however, bureaucratic office holding clearly constitutes a vocation too.

That the office is a “vocation” (Beruf) finds expression, first, in the requirement of a prescribed course of training … and in generally prescribed special examinations as prerequisites of employment. Furthermore, it finds expression in that the position of the official is in the nature of a “duty” (Pflicht). (Weber 1978, 958-959, original emphasis).

Entrance into an office means ‘acceptance of a specific duty of fealty to the purpose of the office (Amtstreue)’ (Weber 1978, 959). Moreover, Weber speaks of the ‘ethics of professional duty’ and ‘ethical discipline’ of the bureaucrat (Weber 1994, 90, 331). Weber delineates this ethic especially in his political writings, where he speaks about the different imperatives and responsibilities to which the politician and the bureaucrat are subject and about what is demanded by the ‘spirit’ of office. Thus, following Paul du Gay (2009), the modern bureau can also be seen as a distinctive life order, which demands of the official a particular conduct of life. This is expressed in an ethical bearing. According to Weber, the bureaucrat needs ethical discipline and rigor, such as strict adherence to procedure, acceptance of hierarchical subordination, renunciation of personal moral positions, suppression of extra-official personal ties and commitment to the purposes of office. These attributes are the outcome of a specific organisational habitus through which individuals acquire the predisposition and capacity to conduct themselves according to the ethos of bureaucratic office (du Gay 2009, 153).

In his political writings, however, Weber highlights not only the ethics of office but also relates them to the ‘honour’ of the official. Weber speaks simultaneously of the ‘ethics of professional duty and professional honour’ (Weber 1994, 90).

If his superior then insists on the instruction, it is not merely the duty of the official, it is also a point of honour for him to carry out that instruction as if it

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6 Other translations for Weber’s term Lebensführung are ‘way of life’, ‘manner of conducting one’s life’ or ‘organisation of life’ (cf. Swedberg 2005, 150-151).

The German term Beruf is central in Weber’s work and has been translated in various ways. In the ‘Protestant Ethic’, Beruf is usually rendered as ‘calling’ or ‘vocation’. The notion of vocation, according to Weber, emerged in Protestantism and first had a religious meaning which was later lost. Having a vocation means that an ‘individual attaches a very strong sense of purpose to his or her work’ … and ‘the ethical duty to perform one’s work well and in a methodical manner’. (Swedberg 2005, 293) In this sense, vocation is especially linked to the notion of ‘conduct of life’. However, in ‘Economy and Society’, Weber also uses Beruf in the more mundane sense of ‘occupation’ or ‘profession’ when he focuses on the nature of the work, the mode of specialisation and work as a basis of a continuous opportunity for income. Frequently, Weber uses the term Beruf in both senses: vocation and profession. In the following, I am employing either ‘vocation’ or ‘profession’ (resp. ‘occupation’) though often, both terms may, in fact, be accurate.
corresponded to his own innermost conviction, thereby demonstrating that his sense of duty to his office overrides his individual wilfulness. (Weber 1994, 160, original emphasis)

It is the link between the ethics of professional duty and the social honour of the official, which is also the precondition for the development of the administrative staff as an ‘occupational status group’.

The officials as a status group

In order to account for different forms of social stratification and for the distribution of power within a community, Weber differentiates between classes, parties and status groups (Stände) in his writings. According to Weber, a status group is a plurality of persons who successfully claim a special social esteem. Thus, the place of status groups is within the sphere of the distribution of honour. Weber designates as

\[ \text{status situation} \]

every typical component of the life of men that is determined by a specific, positive or negative, social estimation of honor. This honor may be connected with any quality shared by a plurality (Weber 1978, 932, original emphasis).

The claim for status honour is expressed by the fact that a specific way of conducting one’s life is expected from all those who wish to belong to the group (Weber 1978, 932). Status groups are characterised by conventions, the striving for privileged economic opportunities, the preference for specific professions and social closure, which ranges from restrictions on social intercourse and marriages to full ethnic segregation. A status group is typically founded on a conduct of life, formal education and hereditary or occupational prestige (Weber 1978, 305-306). With respect to the latter, Weber also refers to the role of occupation in the formation of status groups. Status groups may come into being by virtue of their own conduct of life, particularly by the type of occupation (Weber 1978, 306). Thus, an “occupational status group” (Berufsstand), too, is a status group proper (Weber 1978: 937, original emphasis).

It becomes clear in Weber’s deliberations that bureaucracy can also be considered as an occupational status group and, thus, as the carrier of a specific status development. According to Weber, the spread of bureaucracies throughout society, in public administration as well as in the private economy, has given rise to a new status group or stratum of officials (Beetham 1974, 79). Weber notes that the official claims a special social esteem. ‘Whether he is in a private office or a public bureau, the modern official, too, always strives for and usually attains a distinctly elevated social esteem vis-à-vis the governed’ (Weber 1978, 959). The basis for such social esteem is the prestige of education and an examination diploma in society at large. Weber refers here not only to a qualification in a specialised area of knowledge, but also to ‘general education’ (Bildung) (Weber 1994, 83). He highlights the role of educational differences and the rise of the “man with a degree” (Prüfungsdiplomensch) (Weber 1994, 116) in the formation of new status groups. In the ‘special status prestige of the “educated” strata, our society contains a very tangible element of stratification by status.’ (Weber 1949, 301, original emphasis) The possession of educational

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8 ‘Status group’ is a translation of the German term Stand, which has a double meaning as status and estate. This translation is disputed (Swedberg 2005, 269-270). Stand has been rendered as ‘status group’ as well as ‘status’. The latter has been more common while the German plural form Stände is generally translated as ‘status groups’. With the terms Stand and Stände, as well as with their derivatives (e.g. ständische Lage, ständische Herrschaft) Weber refers primarily to social groups and not to the issue of individual status (cf. Brennan 1997, 162-217; Gane 2005, 217-219). Hence, I perceive the term ‘status group’ as more appropriate.

9 The processes of professionalisation and bureaucratisation are complementary. Weber points out that professionalisation occurs mainly within bureaucracy, giving rise to types of bureaucratic-professionals, such as the priest or the soldier (Ritzer 1975, 632-633).
certificates also constitutes a clear status element in the social position of the public official (Weber 1978, 960; 1994, 83, 293-294). Weber speaks of the development of modern officialdom into a body of intellectual workers highly qualified in their speciality by long years of preparatory training and with a highly developed sense of ... (ständisch) honour which puts a premium on integrity. (Weber 1994, 321-322, original emphasis)

However, a diploma is not only the basis of claims to social prestige, but also a precondition for a rewarding appointment. As a status group, bureaucratic officials strive for privileged positions within and outside the public service. They are aiming for secure posts with a pensionable salary, “appropriate to one’s status”, for advancement in predictable stages and promotion according to seniority (Weber 1994, 155).

The formation of bureaucracy as a status group is also related to the inherent tendency of bureaucracy to exceed its instrumental function (Beetham 1974, 72-79). Weber sees as problematic the fact that domination by means of an administrative staff can turn into domination by the administrative staff itself. The administration can become a separate power group, an independent force in the promotion of its own interests and outlook. Weber refers here to the ‘power instinct’ and ‘power interests’ of bureaucracy (Weber 1949, 233) that helps to preserve and expand its resources and tasks. There are several tendencies which he sees as problematic in that respect, such as the monopolisation of government positions for bureaucratic advancement, the belief of officials in their superior impartiality in interpreting the ‘true’ national interest and their control of file-based knowledge, protected by official secrecy (Beetham 1974, 72-75). Weber stresses these tendencies especially in his political writings and refers to them as ‘rule by officials’ (Beamtenherrschaft).

The foregoing revisiting of Weber’s writings on bureaucracy has shown that his conception of bureaucracy cannot be limited to the well-known ideal-type with its particular emphasis on the functional and instrumental role of the official. A fuller understanding must also take into account his conceptual thoughts on the professional ethics and honour of the official. This aspect, in turn, is linked to Weber’s deliberations of modern bureaucracy as an occupational status group. Weber highlights the separateness and exclusiveness of the status group of bureaucratic officials, distinguished by the social barrier of educational qualifications. I contend that this conception of the bureaucratic officials has continuing relevance for studies in IR that seek to understand the dynamics and effect of the growing body of administrative professionals in international organisations. However, Weber’s conception also needs to be qualified. The prestige of education in society at large has been subject to change since the ‘educational revolution’ took place after the middle of the twentieth century. The possession of educational certificates no longer counts as a status factor to the extent to which Weber emphasised it. Thus, the continued relevance of Weber’s conception lies rather in his particular perspective on the body or group of officials. Weber suggests a perspective of the administrative staff as a status group with specific rights, duties and privileges, which may have a strong sense of belonging together and a feeling of solidarity (Brennan 1997, 163). Weber’s conception directs us to analyze the group character of the bureaucratic staff and the internal bonds and external boundaries which distinguish them. Important here are the role of professional ethics, the striving for privileged positions, practices of social closure and a particular conduct or style of life, which is determined by the occupation and which may become expressed in a claim to social prestige. Weber’s account suggests a sociological analysis of the personnel of international organisations that allows an understanding of their internal cohesion and organisational culture as a social group.

The remainder of this article attempts to show the empirical relevance and added value of such a perspective and takes the example of the civil service of the European Union (EU) as an illustrative case study. The existence of the EU civil service as a distinct group and its cohesion or
lack thereof has been the subject of considerable debate among scholars. It is not intended to go into this debate here. The aim of the following section is to analyse the civil servants of the EU as a transnational status group in the making and to point out the implications of such a perspective with respect to the autonomy of the EU bureaucrats. To do so, it is necessary to employ a constructivist approach by analysing the trajectory of this group through forms of representation and mobilisation as well as through the conflicts, which contribute to a sense of boundary among staff. Social groups are not a given. They become a reality in a process of objectification and the identity of the group materialises itself in organisations, status, material advantages and lifestyle (Georgakakis 2013a, 38-40). It is to these aspects which the next section turns.

The EU civil service as a transnational status group in the making

In 2013 the EU employed more than 40,000 people as staff members at the various EU institutions, such as the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union, the Court of Justice and the European External Action Service. The majority of its staff is allocated to the Commission, which can be seen in many respects as the heart of the EU. It is not only the body that is entitled to initiate and draft legislation but also functions as the guardian of the treaty provisions and as the executive body that ensures that Community decisions are put into practice. The Commission employed 24,944 staff in 2013 (European Commission 2013, 9). Coming from 28 countries, the staff members of the EU are characterised by different educational backgrounds, distinct professional experiences and trajectories and diverse administrative styles, which arise from different national and cultural traditions (Page 1997, 74-80, Ellinas and Suleiman 2012, 50-55). The personnel is diverse and divided. While this has often been pointed out, there is also evidence which hints at the formation of a distinctive status group, closed off by legal rights, material privileges, a sense of solidarity and a separate style of life, which becomes expressed in social and spatial segregation. The latter aspect is the easiest to observe in the case of the EU civil service and it has often been mentioned in journalistic as well as in scholarly accounts. Hence, it is a good starting point for an analysis. Weber’s notion of an occupational status group emphasises a particular conduct of life and the closed nature of the group, which, in the extreme case, can mean total segregation. An insular pattern of socialisation is also characteristic for the EU officials. The homes of the majority of the EU officials are concentrated in particular parts of Brussels. Here, higher rents and house prices have contributed to the creation of separate neighbourhoods or ‘Euro-ghettos’ where almost only EU officials live (Shore 2000, 161-162). The residential segregation is connected with a particular lifestyle of the EU civil servants. Long working days spent in office are followed by after-work socialising in offices, bars and restaurants frequented by EU personnel and foreign diplomats and weekend escapes from Brussels. This is also referred to as the ‘Brussels Bubble’. Other factors that shape the distinguished lifestyle of the EU civil servants are their quasi-diplomatic status including distinctive vehicle registration and immunity against criminal proceedings, separate schooling for their children, their relative affluence compared to local residents and the high status of their positions. The sense of boundary is reinforced by the common experience of dépaysement or ‘exile’ for those people who have had to leave their countries of origin or who have to work in a foreign language (Shore 2000, 163-166; Stevens and Stevens 2001, 130-134). Thus, EU staff live and work in a world that separates them from the local society and everyday life in Brussels. The effect is limited social interaction and personal contacts with local residents.

10 My intention here is not to contribute to distorted images or popular criticism of the EU officials as unaccountable and detached ‘Eurocrats’. Instead, the aim is to realistically assess the development of the personnel as a social group within international administrative institutions. By ‘in the making’, I mean that this development should be understood as an unfinished and reversible process of formation.
The staff of the EU is also characterised as the ‘European civil service’. The notion of such a civil service has been important from the outset of the integration process. The founding fathers of the EU, such as Jean Monnet or Walter Hallstein, already envisaged a committed and independent civil service to achieve the ideals of integration. This civil service would stand above the parochial interests of nation-states and be endowed with a strong sense of mission and *esprit de corps* to promote the integration process. It would be the bearer of a specific ethos of supranationalism (Shore 2000, 139, 177). The result was the creation of the special category of the European civil servant and the building of a permanent career civil service. The rules of this European public service are enshrined in the ‘Staff Regulations of Officials’, which define a series of rights, duties and privileges applying to officials of all EU institutions. These regulations encompass general principles and specific procedures. The general principles refer to the ideal of an autonomous, impartial and competent civil service, which acts independently of member states’ interests. With respect to the characteristics of the personality of an EU official, the regulations also refer to ethical values such as the ‘dignity’, ‘integrity’ and ‘honesty’ of officials or the ‘prestige’ of his or her function (Gravier 2008, 298-299). Moreover, the rules determine concrete regulations with respect to career structure, pay scales, social security benefits, allowances, pension arrangements and disciplinary measures. Thus, the staff regulations not only define an administrative community and shape the professional identity of EU civil servants (Gravier 2008, 285), but also institutionalise and reproduce the EU civil service as a transnational occupational status group in the Weberian sense, based on vocation and warranted by law (Georgakakis 2013b, 293).11

However, these rules do not apply to the entire EU staff, which is a heterogeneous group in terms of legal regulations and employment conditions. This can be illustrated with reference to the Commission, where we can distinguish among three different sized groups of employees. The first group (22,715) encompasses the officials who are assigned to permanent establishment plan posts for an undetermined period of time. This group of personnel is governed by the ‘Staff Regulations of Officials’. The second group (9,023) comprises temporary staff, contract staff, local staff and special advisors. They are contracted for a determined period of time to carry out administrative or manual support service tasks or to replace absent officials. This group is governed by the ‘Conditions of Employment of Other Servants of the European Union’. The third group (1,166) is the non-statutory staff or ‘Agents under national law’. These staff members are assigned to jobs, usually for a fixed period of time, and their employment conditions are stipulated by national regulations. Finally there are those persons who collaborate with the Commission, but are employed by a national administration or contracted by a private company or job agency. This group encompasses seconded national experts, trainees, service providers or interim staff (European Commission 2013, 13, 100). Only the first group, the officials, has guaranteed permanent positions. Thus, different staff members have different status.

With respect to the EU officials, the staff regulations determine a clear career structure, which can be illustrated with reference to the former A-grade officials, who are at the top of the hierarchy and are responsible for the design and management of policy. The classic route is via competitive entry exams, which are also known as the *concours*. A general competition takes place at career entry level and allows entrance at the basic grade of the respective career (Stevens and Stevens 2001, 72-81). Before the overhaul of the staff regulations in 2004, these grades used to be A6/7 and A8. Entering the service is followed by progression through the career grades over a certain period of time. Promotion in the Commission used to be a largely automatic and guaranteed movement, depending de-facto on seniority (Spence and Stevens 2006, 185-186). Regarding to senior appointments, the staff regulations acknowledge that officials for the top grades (formerly A1 for Director Generals and Deputy Directors General and A2 for Director or Principal Adviser) may be appointed by a procedure other than the competitive one. This regulation reflects the established practice in many member states of reserving the most senior

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11 A possibly comparable case is that of the League of Nations, which was the first major international organisation to develop the idea of an international civil service and to establish staff policies for a transnational status group (cf. Ranshofen-Wertheimer 1945).
posts in an administration for trusted political appointees, who may be external to the apparatus (Stevens and Stevens 2001, 81-82). Relatively high salaries, special allowances, good working conditions, job security and generous pensions confer a guaranteed status on these officials (Shore 2000, 140; Stevens and Stevens 2001, 47-48). Thus, permanent employment in the EU civil service is widely seen as prestigious and privileged. This is evinced by the high number of candidates for the competitive entry exams, the low rate of early retirement, low staff turnover and efforts of other staff with temporary contracts or national employment, such as special advisors, consultants or seconded national experts, to remain in the institution after their contractual or secondment periods have expired (Spence and Stevens 2006, 195, Shore 2000, 195). This latter aspect has been especially controversial.

A well-established practice of external and temporary agents and their sponsors has been to bypass the concours via personal contacts and networks in order to acquire the permanent status of an EU official. This has resulted in various practices of patronage, which have also been part of a system of informal nationality quotas, the ‘national flag’ system, according to which certain posts are reserved for certain member states. The ‘parachutes’ and the soumarins (submarines) designate two types of persons who have tried alternative routes of moving into permanent posts in the EU civil service. ‘Parachute’ refers to appointment at the senior level. It means the practice of dropping in candidates from outside the EU civil service directly into senior positions without any competition. This practice of accommodation has been particularly relevant for the members of the Commissioner’s cabinets. While the staff regulations only states that a ‘procedure other than the competition procedure may be adopted by the Appointing Authority for the recruitment of senior officials’ (Article 29, staff regulations), in fact, there never used to be formal competitions at this level (Stevens/Stevens 2001, 82). Moreover, the political appointments extended beyond the two top grades to encompass positions for lower grades, such as A3 (Head of Unit) and A4 (Head of Section or Deputy Head of Unit) (Page 1997, 51), as well. The ‘submarine approach’ describes a practice of co-optation or entry by the back door. It comprises various stages to convert an initially temporary contract via internal competitions organised only for staff into a permanent position and official status (Stevens and Stevens 2001, 87-89). This practice has affected higher and middle-ranking positions such as A3 to A5.

As Weber has pointed out, bureaucratic status groups strive for privileged positions and for certainty of advancement in predictable stages. This is also true for the EU officials. Having been recruited into a career service, they are entitled to advance by incremental steps and can expect promotion to a senior grade if their career extends over a longer period of time (Stevens and Stevens 2001, 97). This is reflected in the fact that EU officials are conscious of rank and status and, at the same time, consider promotion as the rule and demotion as a rare exception (Shore 2000, 182-183). It is, thus, no wonder that the practices of appointments by political and nationality criteria are deeply unpopular and perceived as intrusive. They have caused considerable resentment, especially from the side of the official representatives and speakers for staff – trade unions and staff associations. According to Weber, professional associations and labour unions play an important role in the formation of status groups as they have the capacity to allow only those holding particular educational certificates and patents entry into certain professions (Brennan 1994, 165). In the EU, statutory staff is represented by trade unions and staff associations. The task of these organisations is to relay opinions and requests voiced by staff and to defend their general interests (Stevens and Stevens 2001, 56-60; European Commission 2013, 81-82). The trade unions have strongly protested against the political appointments and clientelist practices and criticised them as undermining the ethos and professionalism of the European Civil service (Spence and Stevens 2006, 196; Shore 2000, 180). Particularly important to the staff unions has been the notion of a steadily ascending career. They have rejected the idea of recruitment at mid-career level, where new entrants would compete with already existing staff seeking promotion. As a result, the Commission has continued to restrict the concours to lower grades. Competitions for entry into higher grades are allowed only for a limited percentage of entrants each year (Spence and Stevens 2006, 182). The unions have played an important role in
defending established procedures and conditions through mobilisation of staff and strikes on several occasions. They have contributed to defending the juridical, economical and social status of the European officials and, thus, the collective interests of the civil service as a status group (Georgakakis 2013a, 43-59).

The resignation of the Santer Commission in 1999 amid allegations of fraud, mismanagement and nepotism provoked an institutional crises and the launching of a far-reaching reform programme, which was implemented between 1999 and 2005 (Schön-Quinlivan 2011). The so-called Kinnock-reform, with its emphasis on New Public Management and austerity, can be seen as a crisis of reproduction and a growing division between the established staff, who enjoy the old conditions, and newcomers, who are employed under new rules (Georgakakis 2013b, 295-297). However, the reforms have also reduced the politicisation at the top (Bauer and Ege 2012). At the same time, the proportion of in-house long term careers has increased. Among the EU public servants, individuals who have spent most of or even their entire professional lives in the EU civil service are becoming more prevalent (Wille 2013, 125-131). The Kinnock-reforms can, thus, also be interpreted as a further step towards a more Weberian bureaucracy that favours merit, seniority in promotions and an ethos of impartiality (Hooghe 2001, 200).12

The EU civil service, as this illustrative case study has shown, is characterised by a particular style of life, a high degree of insulation, social prestige and privileged positions. It displays typical features which, according to Weber, are characteristic of status groups. What does this imply for the capacities of the EU officials to pursue independent agendas and for the bureaucratic autonomy of the commission within the EU system? Having a certain degree of delegated authority and autonomy is the basic characteristic of any international organisation (Barnett and Finnemore 2004, 22-23). In the case of the EU, the notion of an autonomous and impartial European civil service was not only envisaged by the founding fathers of the integration process but is also enshrined in the EU ‘Staff Regulations of Officials’. However, given the diverse backgrounds and national traditions of the individual staff members, such an independent role cannot be assumed a priori but must be shown empirically (Ellinas and Suleiman 2012, 203). The empirical evidence presented here shows that the typical diversity of the staff in international secretariats does not preclude such an independent role, because officials occupy a transnational status that constitutes a powerful binding element. It is not unlikely that this will also affect their outlook. As more recent empirical studies have shown, EU Commission officials are also bound together by a clear sense of mission. They display homogeneous preferences, based on their self-perception as ‘custodians of Europe’, who promote a deeper European integration and a transfer of more power to EU institutions (Ellinas and Suleiman 2012, 4, 31; Trondal 2010, 75-90). The EU civil service is, thus, in a strong position to act in an autonomous fashion according to its own preferences, and increasingly so. Weber might have seen this as a problem. As he reminds us, bureaucracies are unlikely to be mere instruments in the hands of their political masters. Based on their power interests, they are always prone to becoming independent forces that are capable even of acting against the will of their political overseers. It remains to be seen what the EU civil service will make of its autonomy and what this implies for the future of the integration project.

Conclusion

This article has sought to demonstrate that the sociology of Weber has continued relevance for studies in IR that seek to better understand the role of the personnel in international organisations. Weber’s ideal type understanding of bureaucracy has been given close attention in analyses of international bureaucracies. However, as I have argued, his concept of the

12 For Weber, bureaucratisation was also central to modern state formation. However, it remains doubtful whether the tendency towards a more Weberian bureaucracy in Brussels also means the emergence of a supranational state in the EU.
bureaucratic official cannot be limited to the obedient trained individual who is oriented to a particular instrumental role. A more nuanced reading of Weber’s work also reveals other features, which are equally relevant for his understanding of bureaucracy such as the ethical commitment and professional ‘honour’ of the official that are formed in the life order of the bureau. While Weber deemed these aspects as essential for the vocation of office holding, he was, at the same time, concerned that the bureaucratic officials could become a separate status group in society, distinguished by a claim to social prestige.

The illustrative case study of the EU civil service has shown that the concept of occupational status group can be fruitfully applied to the study of international institutions. The EU personnel represent a status group in the making, which becomes objectified in a particular lifestyle, material privileges, status and its own associations (Georgakakis 2013a, 40). The formation of the EU civil service as a status group over the last few decades has been directly dependent on the evolution of the European institutions. This is also taken up by Weber’s point that professionalisation occurs mainly within bureaucracy (Ritzer 1975, 632-633). Professionalisation and bureaucratisation are complementary processes intertwined in the rationalisation of society and, thus, in the global unfolding of formal rationality (Schlichte and Morcillo-Laiz 2012).

While the European civil service presents a good example of how Weber’s categories can be applied, the particular staff characteristics of the EU officials might not be observable elsewhere. As has been argued above, the EU is an atypical case compared to other more ‘classic’ international organisations. However, this does not preclude comparisons to other international organisations, such as the UN, which equally recruit and employ permanent staff. A comparison with historical cases such as the League of Nations could also be worthwhile in that respect. Having said that, the EU certainly represents a crucial case as it selects its personnel through its own established procedure, the concours, which has become an important institution for producing and reproducing the status group of the EU civil servants (Georgakakis 2013b, 293). Here, more comparative empirical research on the recruitment and careers of the personnel of different international organisations would allow more insights into the factors that most likely play an important role in the cohesion, outlook and autonomy of staff.

This article has shown that employing Weber’s notions of bureaucratic officials expands the scope of analysis in IR and open up new lines of enquiry along which future research could develop. Weber’s understanding of bureaucracy as an occupational status group, which is rather implicit in his writings, might serve as a starting point for an explicit and more thorough discussion of his concepts in IR. Max Weber will continue to be a resource for studies, which pursue a better understanding of the officials of international organisations and, more generally, for an analysis of the transnational formation of occupations that have their basis in institutional positions and are involved in defending and promoting their professional interests (Kauppi and Madsen 2013). Weber’s concepts offer promising perspectives for a theoretically informed and empirically grounded political sociology which focuses on the transnational construction of administrative elites.

Notes on Contributor

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