

EDITORS' NOTE

The author Mary McCarthy once opined that “bureaucracy, the rule of no one, has become the modern form of despotism.” By 1958, when McCarthy made her observation, many on the Left had come to share her view of bureaucracies as inherently stifling, their proliferation as a sign of a regimented and even tyrannical society.

The articles in this issue take something of a bureaucratic turn, exploring the workings of some of the most important institutions of the fin-de-siècle United States—New York State’s Public schools, Princeton University, Fisk University, and the United States Weather Bureau. In these four studies, diverse leaders sought to build or transform these institutions. New York Governor Al Smith, as Robert Chiles details in “School Reform as Progressive Statecraft,” sought to revamp his state’s schools as a key part of his ambitious vision of a strong welfare regime that carefully watched over its citizens’ housing, medical care, work, and recreation. The leaders of Princeton University, including future U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, grew concerned that continuing to emphasize the importance of Christian conversion put them at a disadvantage in attracting elite students in an increasingly competitive college market. As Andrea Turpin explains in “The Chief End of Man at Princeton,” they found their solution in a more heavily gendered vision of moral formation and service, and altered the school’s curriculum and social scene accordingly. The challenges faced by Fisk University in the early 1870s were more daunting. Fisk’s Jubilee Singers, argues Gabriel Milner in “The Tenor of Belonging,” achieved a national visibility for themselves and their institution, successfully marketing their past to secure a future. In the final article, “Hurricanes, Crops, and Capital,” Jamie Pietruska shows how the United States expanded its young meteorological infrastructure into the Caribbean in the wake of its triumph in the 1898 Spanish-American War, helping to connect the agrarian economies of Puerto Rico and Cuba to the U.S. market.

These case studies provide material that supports McCarthy’s dark take on bureaucracy. Al Smith’s educational initiatives followed the guidance of scholars and experts rather than parents and students, precisely the kind of reliance on expertise that scholars from Richard Hofstadter to Michael McGerr have criticized as typifying progressive social control rather than democratic empowerment. The changes made at Princeton not only ensured that this elite university would continue to accept only male students, but also that it encouraged them to think of their virtues as distinctively and exclusively masculine, in a way that their predecessors had not. From one vantage, the Fisk Jubilee singers fostered an image of a simple, even primitive (African) American identity rooted in the soil and perpetual hardship, evoking nostalgia and racial essentialism rather than solidarity and compassion in their white audiences. The scientific order that American meteorologists sought to impose on their imperial sphere was to be used for the benefit of their allies and accomplices. The bureau’s administrators actively punished noncooperating countries by denying them access to critical information about the storms, showing that humanitarian claims about scientific knowledge sometimes masked an iron fist.

Yet these stories are much more complicated. American meteorology relied on local knowledge and expertise, in an exchange that was more of a dialogue than a monologue. Who was using whom in the Jubilee Singers' performances of spirituals? Milner sees the performers, like their enslaved ancestors, using their songs to earn autonomy, cohesion, and pride in the midst of daunting challenges, prefiguring the better-known "bootstraps" ethos of Booker T. Washington and the "double consciousness" of W. E. B. Du Bois. Turpin discerns in the changes at Princeton a shift from an evangelical spirituality, "vertical" in the sense that it focused on relating rightly to God, to a modernist spirituality, "horizontal" in the sense that it focused on the moral relations between people. This new sensibility may have bolstered male self-esteem and power, but it also fostered a leadership devoted to addressing real and pressing social problems. Robert Chiles similarly emphasizes the profoundly democratic nature of Smith's educational reforms, which made the state's largest bureaucracy more humane and equitable even as it provided thousands with opportunities for learning and advancement absent from Smith's own childhood.

Despotic or not, bureaucracies—such as schools and government bureaus—continue to be good to think with.

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