

Gestión y Análisis de Políticas Públicas, número 40, marzo de 2026
 Sección: ARTÍCULOS
 Recibido: 23-09-2025
 Modificado: 02-02-2026
 Aceptado: 02-02-2026
 Publicado: 31-03-2026
 ISSN: 1989-8991 – DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24965/gapp.11590>
 Páginas: 7-21



Referencia: Bauer, M. W. (2026). Resisting illiberalism: Bureaucratic ethics in illiberal times might need Hegel more than Weber. *Gestión y Análisis de Políticas Públicas*, 40, 7-21. <https://doi.org/10.24965/gapp.11590>

Resisting illiberalism: Bureaucratic ethics in illiberal times might need Hegel more than Weber

La ética burocrática en tiempos antiliberales podría necesitar más a Hegel que a Weber

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NOTA BIOGRÁFICA

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This chapter examines the ethical dilemma of bureaucrats in democracies facing illiberal transformation. It argues that the dominant Weberian model of neutrality and hierarchical obedience offers little normative ground for resisting executive orders that undermine constitutional democracy. The objective is to explore whether Hegel's conception of bureaucracy as part of the ethical life (Sittlichkeit) of the state provides a firmer foundation for legitimizing bureaucratic resistance. **Methodology:** The chapter employs a conceptual and comparative analysis of Weber's and Hegel's theories of bureaucracy, complemented by neo-Hegelian critiques (Frankfurt School, Hannah Arendt). It reconstructs Hegel's view of bureaucracy as a mediating "universal class" and contrasts it with Weber's ethically minimalist model to derive implications for public administration ethics and education. **Results:** The analysis shows that Weberian neutrality risks enabling democratic backsliding by rendering bureaucrats passive executors. Hegel's framework, by contrast, embeds ethical judgment within institutional roles and provides a normative basis for civil servants to act as guardians of constitutional order under illiberal rule. **Conclusions:** Public administration education should cultivate a liberal-institutional ethos that prepares bureaucrats not only to administer impartially but also to exercise principled resistance when democracy is threatened.

KEYWORDS

Administrative ethics; bureaucratic ethos; bureaucratic discretion; democratic backsliding; illiberal transformation; administrative responsibility; bureaucratic guardianship.

RESUMEN

Objetivos: este capítulo examina el dilema ético de los burócratas en las democracias que se enfrentan a una transformación antiliberal. Sostiene que el modelo weberiano dominante de neutralidad y obediencia jerárquica ofrece pocos fundamentos normativos para resistirse a las órdenes ejecutivas que socavan la democracia constitucional. El objetivo es explorar si la concepción de Hegel de la burocracia como parte de la vida ética (Sittlichkeit) del Estado proporciona una base más sólida para legitimar la resistencia burocrática. **Metodología:** el capítulo emplea un análisis conceptual y comparativo de las teorías de la

burocracia de Weber y Hegel, complementado con críticas neohegelianas (Escuela de Frankfurt, Hannah Arendt). Reconstruye la visión de Hegel de la burocracia como una «clase universal» mediadora y la contrasta con el modelo éticamente minimalista de Weber para derivar implicaciones para la ética y la educación de la administración pública. **Resultados:** el análisis muestra que la neutralidad weberiana corre el riesgo de propiciar un retroceso democrático al convertir a los burócratas en ejecutores pasivos. El marco de Hegel, por el contrario, integra el juicio ético en las funciones institucionales y proporciona una base normativa para que los funcionarios públicos actúen como guardianes del orden constitucional bajo un régimen iliberal. **Conclusiones:** la formación en administración pública debe cultivar un espíritu liberal-institucional que prepare a los burócratas no solo para administrar de manera imparcial, sino también para ejercer una resistencia basada en principios cuando la democracia se vea amenazada.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Ética burocrática; retroceso democrático; transformación antiliberal; responsabilidad administrativa; tutela burocrática.

SUMARIO

1. INTRODUCTION. 2. THE CHALLENGE OF ILLIBERALISM FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION. 3. THE LIMITS OF WEBERIAN NEUTRALITY. 4. HEGEL'S THEORY OF BUREAUCRACY: ETHICAL INSTITUTION OR STATIST OVERREACH? 5. TWO TRADITIONS OF BUREAUCRATIC ETHOS: INSTRUMENTAL-BUREAUCRATIC VS. INSTITUTIONAL-DEMOCRATIC. 6. CONCLUSION: BEYOND NEUTRALITY – HEGELIAN IDEAS FOR AN ACTIVATING BUREAUCRATIC ETHOS. FINANCING. REFERENCES.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

The rise of illiberal governments constitutes a dilemma for democratic bureaucrats.² Under illiberal rule unconditional loyalty and obedience may render them complicit in democratic backsliding – or even co-responsible for the autocratic transformation of the democratic constitutional order to which they have sworn an oath (Bauer *et al.*, 2021). This tension between loyalty to democratic values (enshrined in the constitution) and compliance with illiberal directives of a democratically elected but bad-intended government confronts bureaucrats with a fundamental ethical choice: obedience or resistance (Bauer, 2024c). The question thus becomes on what grounds, within the tradition of public administration thought, can we justify what bureaucrats ought to do?³

Against this backdrop, several propositions are put forward in this chapter. The first proposition is that according to the Weberian tradition (which coins the mainstream of the discipline of Public Administration, see Kettl, 2022; Seibel, 2010) it is virtually impossible to justify meaningful bureaucratic resistance to potential democratic backsliding of incumbent governments.⁴ The second is that it is thus worthwhile to revisit

¹ I approach the themes of this chapter as a social scientist rather than as a philosopher and have therefore relied on the work of colleagues whose philosophical insights have been vital in shaping my interpretation. I am particularly indebted to Karsten Fischer (2002; 2025) for his encouragement to engage with Hegel as well as to the works of Fritz Sager & Christian Rosser (2009), Carl K. Y. Shaw (1992) as well as Michael Spicer (2004). The usual disclaimer applies: all errors and misreadings of the texts – especially those of Hegel and Weber themselves – remain, of course, my own. As a non-native English speaker, I also acknowledge the assistance of large language models in matters of grammar and orthography. I am also grateful to Mercedes Alda Fernández for the Spanish translation of the text. As a non-Spanish speaker, I was nonetheless unable to engage with the Spanish-language literature on the topic as fully as I would have wished.

² The threats posed by authoritarian populist and illiberal governments to public administration are extensively discussed – for overviews and further references see Bauer & Becker (2020) as well as Bauer (2024a; 2024b; 2024c).

³ In this article, bureaucracy is understood in a narrow sense as a public or executive organization charged with preparing and/or implementing collectively binding decisions. Public administration is used in a broader sense to denote the overall complex of governmental structures, processes, and actors. Bureaucracy is thus treated as a specific organizational form within public administration, characterized by formalized roles, rule-bound authority, and delegated public power (Olsen, 2006). Bureaucrats refer to the individual officeholders working within bureaucratic organizations. The analysis does not distinguish systematically between staff categories (e.g. permanent versus temporary officials, senior versus junior positions), but implicitly focuses on policy-relevant administrative actors, i.e., bureaucrats, whose work involves interpretation, judgment, and discretion within institutional roles.

⁴ Some interpreters of Weber argue that his framework allows limited bureaucratic resistance when fundamental legal or constitutional norms are violated (see Friedrich, 1952; Jackson, 2009). This section emphasizes that such space remains narrow and contingent on political authorization.

G. W. F. Hegel's ideas of bureaucracy if searching for an ethical basis for bureaucratic resistance against rogue governments is the aim. This chapter thus aims to open, thirdly, a conversation on whether Hegelian thought can inform the development of a contemporary institutionalist ethos for liberal public administration education, one designed to strengthen resilience against attempts of illiberal transformation (Fischer, 2025; Moyar, 2004).

The chapter proceeds as follows. It begins by outlining the challenge that the rise of illiberalism poses for public administration, particularly how traditional bureaucratic norms are vulnerable to manipulation under authoritarian-populist regimes. The second section critically assesses the Weberian tradition, arguing that its emphasis on neutrality, hierarchical subordination, and legal-rational authority limits the ethical agency of bureaucrats in resisting democratic backsliding. The following section contrasts Weber's model with Hegel's conception of bureaucracy, exploring how their respective philosophical foundations yield opposing visions of bureaucratic ethos. The core of the chapter reconstructs Hegel's theory of bureaucracy from the *Philosophy of Right*, interpreting it as a normative institutional framework that can ground a modern ethos of bureaucratic guardianship. The final sections elaborate the implications of this Hegelian perspective for contemporary public administration, distinguishing between an instrumental-bureaucratic and a liberal-institutional ethos, and arguing for the latter as a basis for ethical resistance in illiberal times.

Comparing the Weberian and Hegelian lines of PA thinking concerning the role of the bureaucracy within the state – and the normative ethos they imply for individual bureaucrats – is not a matter of declaring one “right” and the other “wrong”. Rather, such a comparison should be understood as an invitation to reflect on the scope conditions of the dominating Weberian approach, which rests on the premise of advancing societal rationalization and democratic republicanism (Weber, 2011b). If, however, our political systems are drifting toward regime types characterized by post-truth governments advancing authoritarian transformations, then in such illiberal contexts it appears both necessary and justified to reconsider alternative philosophical foundations for bureaucratic behavior – foundations that can provide for an activating bureaucratic ethos of resisting the dismantling of democratic governance (Bauer, 2024a).

2. THE CHALLENGE OF ILLIBERALISM FOR PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

The rise of authoritarian populism is a serious challenge for contemporary public administration (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Crespo González, 2023). Far from being a passing political trend, illiberalism constitutes a structural force that affects both democratic institutions at large and administrative systems in particular (Peters & Pierre, 2019). Public administration, as both a field of study and a domain of governance, must learn how to cope theoretically and practically with a political context in which executive power is being used not merely to advance illiberal policy (which, up to a point – defined by the constitution – elected government might actually be empowered to pursue), but to reshape the institutional logic and ethical foundations of the administrative state itself (Yesilkagit *et al.*, 2024).

Social science scholarship increasingly recognizes that the illiberal challenge may stem from structural deficiencies inherent in the current manifestations of liberal democracy itself (Mouffe, 2000; Merkel, 2014). The rise of illiberal political movements appears, then, to be driven, at least in part, by widespread disillusionment with the perceived failure of current representative democracy to deliver on its core promises. Key contributing factors include growing socioeconomic inequality, institutional unresponsiveness, and the narrowing of policy alternatives within the bounds of elite liberal consensus or supranational constraints (Schäfer & Zürn, 2023). While a comprehensive account of the causes underlying the current illiberal success exceeds the scope of this chapter, the scholarly debate so far suggests that such dynamics are unlikely to be reversed by short-term electoral turnover alone. What is increasingly evident is that illiberal actors have been able to exploit underlying structural tensions of liberal democratic systems to gain executive power and, once in office, have pursued agendas marked by the fusion of nationalist rhetoric, institutional centralization, and democratic erosion (Bermeo, 2016; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Hajnal & Boda, 2021).

Seen from the perspective of public administration education, this situation calls for a rethinking of PA's mission. Traditionally grounded in principles of neutrality, expertise, and hierarchical obedience, public administration now faces an environment in which these very principles can be manipulated to legitimize illiberal state transformation – potentially transplanting democracy with some new form of authoritarian rule (Pfiffner, 2019). The PA discipline may thus have to re-engage with political theory and normative frameworks – along the lines Waldo some decades ago articulated (Waldo, 1952; 1984) – to develop bureaucratic ethics that

prioritize democratic resilience rather than technocratic subservience (Bertelli, 2021; Cooper, 2012; du Gay, 2020).

A growing body of scholarship has identified the illiberal strategies employed to transform administrative systems – such as the centralization of authority, the budgetary marginalization of disfavored agencies, the politicization of appointments, the erosion of merit-based norms, and the weakening of oversight mechanisms – and has documented their effects on both policy delivery and the broader democratic order (Peters & Pierre, 2019; Bauer *et al.*, 2021). As illiberal governments do not just circumvent bureaucracies but seek to instrumentalize them in pursuit of polarizing and particularistic agendas, it is all the more necessary to reengage with the conception of public administration as inherently moral and political.⁵

The illiberal challenge thus requires a double response from PA scholarship: empirical and normative. Empirically, the field is called upon to document and analyze the mechanisms of administrative transformation under populist rule. Normatively, it becomes necessary to reflect on the ethical obligations of civil servants and the democratic functions of public administration in contexts where the executive becomes a driver of democratic backsliding (Bermeo, 2016; Yesilkagit *et al.*, 2024).

Ultimately, the field must decide whether prevailing conceptions of democratic bureaucracy – as a neutral executor of electoral mandates or as a pluralist institution with autonomous legitimacy – remain adequate in the face of rising illiberal power. As an emerging body of scholarship suggests, the defense of democratic governance in the 21st century may in part hinge on how public administration rearticulates its role and institutional obligations under conditions of democratic stress (Stivers & DeHart-Davis, 2022; Bertelli, 2021; Koliba, 2025; Yesilkagit *et al.*, 2024). If this challenge is to be taken seriously, the pressing question for Public Administration education becomes, on what intellectual foundations can an activating ethic of bureaucratic guardianship of liberal democracy be built?

3. THE LIMITS OF WEBERIAN NEUTRALITY

Max Weber's conceptualization of bureaucracy has shaped the intellectual foundations of public administration more profoundly than any other single scholarly account. This dominance tends to overshadow the fact that Weber approached the question of bureaucratic organization not primarily as a theorist of public administration but as a sociologist concerned with the broader patterns of legitimate rule under conditions of capitalist modernization in late 19th-century societies (Mommsen, 2004). It is in this context that Weber developed the ideal type of legal-rational authority, characterized by a bureaucratic mode of organization. Its conception was thus part of a broader theory of rationalization – one that was, in fact, deeply critical of the effects of bureaucratization on the alienation of modern life.⁶

Weber did therefore not formulate a full theory of public bureaucracy *per se*, in the modern, empirical, and normative sense.⁷ His analysis was sociological and conceptual, encompassing both public and private bureaucracies. It was diagnostic and not prescriptive in the way later theorists – such as Dwight Waldo or Herbert Simon – sought to articulate normative theories of public administration within democratic regimes.

⁵ Examples from recent cases include the Trump administration's efforts to reclassify civil servants under the infamous Schedule F, Brazil's militarization of ministries under Bolsonaro, and Hungary's legal restructuring of its civil service under Orbán (Moynihan, 2022; Bauer, Lotta *et al.*, 2025; Hajnal & Boda, 2021). Such efforts have clear democratic consequences. As administrative autonomy is curtailed, the capacity of public institutions to serve as neutral implementers and as safeguards of constitutional order is severely compromised.

⁶ Max Weber's conception of bureaucracy rests on a formal-legal foundation emphasizing hierarchy, expertise, rule-following, and a depoliticized "ethos of office". This ethos promotes political abstinence and requires civil servants to obey their political superiors with loyalty and discipline, thus offering predictability and reliability in public service (du Gay, 2020; du Gay & Lopdrup-Hjorth, 2022). The bureaucrat, in Weber's model, is tasked with implementing the will of elected officials efficiently and impartially, even if the policies in question may conflict with the bureaucrat's own values or professional judgment.

⁷ It is important to note that the now-canonical exposition of bureaucratic rule, commonly attributed to *Economy and Society* (Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft), was assembled posthumously by his widow Marianne Weber and first published in 1922. This edition drew on a heterogeneous collection of unfinished manuscripts, lecture notes, and dictations left behind at the time of Weber's death in 1920. Notably, the central sections on bureaucratic administration were extracted from fragmentary drafts of his broader project on the sociology of domination (Herrschaft), which itself remained incomplete. Contemporary scholarship, particularly the critical apparatus of the Max Weber Complete Edition (Max-Weber-Gesamtausgabe), has confirmed that Weber's writings on bureaucracy were never integrated into a final, author-approved treatise. Rather, the ideal type of bureaucracy emerged through editorial reconstruction and retrospective systematization by later interpreters. See Weber (1995), Mommsen (1984, pp. 350-357), Kasler (1988, pp. 254-267), Scaff (2011, pp. 87-91). See also the explanations in the introduction by Winkelmann in Weber (2011b).

Moreover, Weber could not foresee the emergence of the modern social welfare state, nor the massive proliferation of bureaucratic forms and responsibilities coming along with it. His main empirical referent was the Prussian bureaucracy, which at the time was responsible primarily for managing the state budget and foreign policy. This bureaucracy operated under the strong authority of the Prussian emperor, alongside a weak parliament and a class of largely mediocre politicians (Spicer, 2004; Weber, 2011b).

This is important to recognize, as Weber's principal concern in his political writings (between 1918 and 1920; see Weber, 1988) was that such a powerful bureaucracy might dominate the political sphere, outstripping the weak and often ineffectual political leadership. His fear, therefore, was not of bureaucrats being disloyal but of a bureaucratic regime overpowering democratic political entrepreneurship (Casper, 2007; Breiner, 2019). This fear explains Weber's ambivalent endorsement of charismatic leadership as a counterbalance to bureaucratic power. In Weber's view, a strong, charismatic leader might serve to connect citizens with politics and rein in the dominance of the bureaucracy – a "Weberian" proposition largely downplayed in postwar public administration, especially after the catastrophic consequences of "charismatic rule" during the Nazi era.

Furthermore, Weber's well-known distinction between the "ethic of responsibility" (Verantwortungsethik) and the "ethic of conviction" (Gesinnungsethik) was explicitly meant for political leaders, not for civil servants. Bureaucrats, in Weber's model, are required to remain neutral and obedient. While they may offer warnings or express concern about policy consequences for the common good (Gemeinwesen) of specific decisions, their duty ends with advising. If the political leader insists, the bureaucrat must obey.⁸ This is the fate of the bureaucrat in Weber's conception: bound to neutrality and subordination.

This instrumental conception of administration is not unique to Weber.⁹ It has been reinforced by the politics-administration dichotomy, as seen in the work of Wilson and Goodnow, and later amplified by public choice theory, which depicted bureaucrats as self-interested actors (Niskanen, 1971). Despite comparative empirical research indicating a substantial convergence between bureaucratic and political role understandings *in practice* (Aberbach *et al.*, 1981; Baena del Alcázar *et al.*, 1984), much of the analytical literature continued to rely on the politics-administration dichotomy as a structuring assumption *for theory development*. The result has been a dominant conception of bureaucrats as functionaries rather than moral agents, discouraged from exercising independent ethical judgment even in moments of constitutional peril.

My proposition is that the rise of authoritarian populism has now exposed the limitations of this traditional Weberian model of bureaucratic neutrality. As authoritarian populists gain power and seek to erode liberal-democratic norms from within, bureaucrats risk becoming complicit in democratic backsliding if they adhere blindly to the neutrality principle (Bauer, 2024c; Yesilkagit *et al.*, 2024). In this light bureaucratic neutrality can no longer be seen as politically innocent – at least not under all circumstances. Instead, it may enable executive overreach and democratic decay.

It is no surprise that recent scholarship increasingly questions the neutrality doctrine. It suggests that in situations where elected governments act against liberal-democratic values, bureaucrats should uphold professional and constitutional standards, even at the cost of disobedience (Stivers & DeHart-Davis, 2022; Terry, 2003; 2015). The unresolved tension between obedience and ethical responsibility – also articulated in the famous Friedrich-Finer debate (Jackson, 2009) – remains central to today's challenges. While Friedrich emphasized intrinsic professional norms and ethical discretion (Friedrich, 1952; 1960), Finer reinforced a strict Weberian chain of command as key to democratic administration (Finer, 1941). Given today's circumstances, this debate deserves fresh attention.

In sum, one might argue that there are two Max Weber: on the one hand, the sociologist who constructed an ideal-typical model of bureaucracy as a component of legal-rational authority; on the other, the politically engaged observer who harbored deep concerns about the dominance of bureaucratic rule over democratic

⁸ Weber writes in "Politik und Beruf": „Die Ehre des Beamten ist die Fähigkeit, wenn – trotz seiner Vorstellungen – die ihm vorge-setzte Behörde auf einem ihm falsch erscheinenden Befehl beharrt, ihn auf Verantwortung des Befehlenden gewissenhaft und genau so auszuführen, als ob er seiner eigenen Überzeugung entspräche: ohne diese im höchsten Sinn sittliche Disziplin und Selbstverleugnung zerfiel der ganze Apparat“. (In my translation: "The honor of the civil servant is his ability to execute conscientiously and precisely the order of the superior authority, even when he personally believes it to be wrong – provided that, once the authority insists upon it, he acts on the responsibility of the one who issued the order. Without this moral discipline and self-denial in the highest sense, the entire apparatus would fall apart").

⁹ This notion was clearly articulated in the mid-20th century debate between Carl J. Friedrich (1960) and Herman Finer (1941). Finer forcefully upheld the Weberian position, stressing the duty of bureaucrats to follow the chain of command, even if they personally disagreed with the policies being implemented. For an overview and the complete references see Jackson (2009).

leadership (Weber, 2011a; 1988).¹⁰ These tensions, left unresolved in his unfinished and posthumously compiled writings, continue to resonate today. The Weberian model – foundational to both the institutionalization of public administration as a discipline and to prevailing understandings of bureaucratic organization – may therefore now require recontextualization. In an era marked by democratic erosion, the norm of bureaucratic neutrality should be critically reflected. Civil servants in liberal democracies may need to embrace an active ethos – one that legitimizes principled administrative resistance in defense of constitutional democracy, rather than unconditional execution of electoral mandates irrespective of their democratic consequences (Bauer, 2024c; Yesilkagit *et al.*, 2024).

Recent public administration research has begun to articulate threshold-based accounts of when bureaucratic resistance to elected governments may be normatively justified, particularly under conditions of democratic backsliding (Bauer, 2024b). Such research argues that resistance becomes legitimate when governments no longer act within their democratically bounded role but instead “aggrandize” their executive power and undermine constitutional constraints, liberal rights, or institutional checks. While this line of reasoning provides important orientation for assessing the degree and intensity of resistance, it presupposes a prior and more fundamental question: whether, and on what grounds, bureaucratic resistance can be conceived as normatively legitimate in the first place. To formulate an answer to this question one needs to revisit the philosophical foundations of bureaucratic ethos and authority. By referring in this respect to Hegel, the aim is not to specify empirical thresholds of resistance but rather to clarify the conditions under which bureaucratic judgment and guardianship can be understood as compatible with, rather than antagonistic to, democratic legitimacy (see Bauer, 2024b; 2024c).

At this point, before engaging more concretely with Hegel’s views on the state bureaucracy, an asymmetry of the comparison between Weber and Hegel needs to be acknowledged explicitly. Weber was not only a theorist of bureaucracy, but a foundational scholar of the empirical social sciences, and his model of rational-legal administration has had a profound impact on theory-building, inspiring extensive empirical research. Hegel, by contrast, was a philosopher, and his reflections on bureaucracy remained deliberately abstract and normative, and thus almost by definition “empirically under-specified”. This asymmetry helps to explain why Weber’s account became dominant for public administration research, while Hegel’s has largely remained outside the public administration canon. The comparison pursued here is therefore not empirical in kind but normative in purpose: Hegel is not reread in the hope of extracting a ready-made administrative model from his thinking, but as an alternative philosophical foundation from which a different institutional understanding of bureaucratic ethos – and its ethical scope under conditions of democratic backsliding – can be constructed.

4. HEGEL’S THEORY OF BUREAUCRACY: ETHICAL INSTITUTION OR STATIST OVERREACH?

The previous section has shown why the Weberian ideal of bureaucratic neutrality and role obedience, while foundational for public administration theory, becomes normatively fragile under conditions of democratic backsliding. Beyond Weber’s influential but ethically minimalist account, a more normatively ambitious conception of bureaucracy can be found in the work of G. W. F. Hegel – one that grounds administrative authority not merely in legal rationality, but in the ethical calling of a mediator between the general and particular. Hegel’s conception of bureaucracy must be understood within his broader philosophical project of reconciling individual freedom with the rational institutional order of the constitutional state.

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel presents the state not merely as a coercive structure or contractual arrangement, but as the highest embodiment of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) – an institutional order where individual autonomy and collective rationality are reconciled (Henrich, 2004; Moyer, 2004; Nah, 2022).¹¹ For Hegel, the state is the actuality of the ethical idea, the concrete realization of freedom through the mediation of universal norms and social institutions. Bureaucracy, in this schema, is not a technocratic instrument but a core organ of this ethical life (Sager & Rosser, 2009). It functions as both a stabilizing and mediating institution that

¹⁰ Some Weber interpreters have emphasized that his distinction between the “ethic of responsibility” and “ethic of conviction” may leave more space for bureaucratic judgment than is typically acknowledged (see Breiner, 2019, with more references). This chapter, however, follows the dominant interpretation in public administration scholarship that sees Weber as endorsing role-specific obedience over discretionary resistance.

¹¹ Hegel’s concept of the bureaucracy is laid down in a relatively short part of his *Philosophy of Right*, namely the paragraphs 287-297. See Hegel (1991).

translates the universal into the particular, and thereby sustains the rational coherence of the constitutional order.

Hegel's theory of bureaucracy can be distilled into four interrelated components (Shaw, 1992; Jackson, 1986). First, bureaucracy is the institutionalization of practical judgment (*phronesis*). Rather than viewing administrative action as the mechanical application of rules (*technē* – as in the conception of Max Weber), Hegel sees bureaucrats as engaging in ethical reasoning akin to judicial deliberation. Bureaucrats interpret and concretize universal laws in specific contexts, exercising a form of discretion that is not arbitrary but embedded in normative reasoning. This process of “subsumption” – applying the general to the particular in ways that preserve coherence – demands cultivated judgment and contextual knowledge, not pure technical expertise (Shaw, 1992, p. 384).

Second, bureaucracy embodies the “universal class”. Civil servants, for Hegel, are not merely specialized professionals but ethically trained individuals who act on behalf of the public interest, transcending the particularisms of economic or partisan interests. Their education and recruitment are meant to elevate them above factional pressures, situating them within the rational constitution of the state. Unlike elected politicians who represent sectional constituencies, bureaucrats represent the universal by virtue of their institutional role and moral vocation. This positions them as a crucial ethical stratum within the state – one that undergirds its legitimacy and coherence (Jackson, 2009; Tijsterman & Overeem, 2008, pp. 73-75).

Third, bureaucracy mediates between civil society and the state. One of Hegel's primary concerns was the fragmentation of modern life under the pressures of market society and particularist interests. Bureaucracy serves as the bridge between the atomized interests of civil society and the integrative logic of the constitutional state. In this mediating role, civil servants stabilize the political community by translating abstract legal norms into concrete governance while maintaining a commitment to universality. This function is essential in preserving social unity amid economic differentiation and pluralism (Shaw, 1992, p. 381; Spicer, 2004, pp. 98-99).

Fourth, bureaucracy is a “regulative” rather than a “teleological” institution. Hegel does not envision bureaucracy as pursuing external goals or serving ideological ends. Instead, it sustains the legal and moral infrastructure of the *Rechtsstaat* by adapting and applying norms in the light of changing circumstances. Bureaucratic discretion, in this view, is an institutional necessity – an ongoing adjustment of universal principles to concrete realities. Unlike Weber's conception, where bureaucratic activity is subordinated to the goals of political leadership, Hegel places civil servants within the normative structure of the state itself, filling their function with independent ethical significance (Tijsterman & Overeem, 2008, p. 75; Shaw, 1992, p. 385).

In contrast to Hegel's normative-ethical view, Max Weber offers a structural-functional account of bureaucracy rooted in legal-rational authority. For Weber, bureaucracy is a formalized instrument of administrative efficiency, defined by rule-bound procedures, meritocratic recruitment, and impersonal execution of office. While acknowledging its technical superiority, Weber warned of its dehumanizing effects and its tendency toward autonomous domination – the so-called “iron cage” of rationalization. Bureaucrats, in this model, are politically neutral executors of legal directives, and their legitimacy lies in their obedience to legal norms, not in any intrinsic moral authority. The sharp dualism between politics and administration underpins this view: any deviation from subordination is treated as a pathological breach.

This contrast reflects a deeper philosophical divergence. Weberian bureaucracy is predicated on control – limiting discretion to prevent bureaucratic overreach. Hegelian bureaucracy is grounded in coherence – trusting discretion as a medium of ethical integration. For Weber, bureaucratic autonomy is a risk; for Hegel, it is a condition of rational governance (Shaw, 1992). These competing logics yield starkly different responses to democratic backsliding: whereas Weberian orthodoxy leaves little normative room for bureaucratic resistance against illiberal transformation, Hegelian thought can be invoked to justify a form of ethical guardianship by civil servants when the state's rational foundation is at risk.

No doubt that some caution is in order here. Hegel does, of course, not provide a theory of resistance, rather he implicitly conditions bureaucratic legitimacy on the rationality of the state itself.¹² If that foundation collapses – in our perspective: when illiberal rulers undermine the state's mission for highest ethical and integrative conduct – then the ethical obligations of civil servants cannot simply be dissolved into obedience to

¹² One should note that Hegel's conception of the state as the “actuality of the ethical idea” presupposes a rational state whose legitimacy is not in question. This makes his framework ambiguous when the empirical state deviates from its “rational telos”. While this chapter draws on Hegel to justify a bureaucratic ethos of liberal-democratic guardianship, it acknowledges that such an interpretation stretches beyond Hegel's explicit writings and approaches his political theory through an immanent-critical reading.

the abusive rulers.¹³ Instead, bureaucrats must rely on their cultivated judgment and normative commitment to the public good – precisely the virtues Hegel attributed to them.

This ambivalence – between ethical integration and statist overreach – marks the enduring tension within the Hegelian theory of bureaucracy and signals the need for a more reflexive democratic theory that safeguards both institutional coherence and moral autonomy (see Habermas, 1987). In other words, while Hegel's thinking cannot be said to advocate a blueprint for active bureaucratic resistance against illiberal transformation, it opens a space for the “universal class” of bureaucrats to just do this: to act collectively (and not just individually, as could be justified by the Kantian categorical imperative) in a liberal-institutional sense as protectors of the state as the “highest embodiment of ethical life” against particularist usurpation.¹⁴

In sum, this section has attempted to reconstruct Hegel's conception of bureaucracy as an ethical institution, highlighting its potential as a foundation for a more active understanding of bureaucratic judgment once the state ceases to reliably embody universal interests.

5. TWO TRADITIONS OF BUREAUCRATIC ETHOS: INSTRUMENTAL-BUREAUCRATIC VS. INSTITUTIONAL-DEMOCRATIC

Having reconstructed the contrasting accounts of bureaucracy by Weber and Hegel, we are now in a position to draw a broader theoretical distinction that may help locate the ideas of both theorists within the evolution of public administration thinking. The diverging philosophical commitments of Weber and Hegel – control versus coherence, neutrality versus normative judgment – can be seen as the focal points for two paradigms of bureaucratic ethics that continue to shape contemporary administrative thought: the instrumental-bureaucratic ethos and the liberal-institutional ethos.

The instrumental-bureaucratic ethos aligns most closely with the Weberian tradition. It views bureaucrats as neutral executors of political will, operating under strict hierarchies, rule-bound procedures, and external accountability to political leadership. This view has dominated mainstream public administration scholarship, shaped by theorists such as Woodrow Wilson, Frank Goodnow, and Max Weber, and reinforced by rational choice models (Niskanen, 1971; Dunleavy, 1991; Moe, 1995). In this view, bureaucratic discretion is deviant and to be minimized, while the relationship between politics and administration is one-directional and supervisory. Bureaucrats serve the government of the day, not a normative conception of the public good. Their legitimacy derives from loyalty, legality, and efficiency – not ethical agency (Finer, 1941).

By contrast, what might be termed a liberal-institutional ethos draws on Hegelian foundations and underpins a more heterodox strand of administrative theory. Such a line of thinking has gained renewed relevance in analyses of the welfare state administration, particularly as the executive branch assumes an increasingly dominant role within modern representative democracies (Rosanvallon, 2011; Heath, 2020). From this perspective, bureaucrats are not merely passive executors of political directives but can be indeed understood as members of a “universal class” – pro-social actors with normative responsibilities to uphold constitutional values and to mediate between particularistic interests and the general good (Terry, 2003).

In such a Hegelian-inspired interpretation, bureaucracy is not merely a mechanism of administrative control but a site of ethical judgment (more based on *phronesis*, see also Arendt, 2019), civic responsibility,

¹³ Hegel's exaltation of the state has historically been used to legitimize both liberal and authoritarian projects. This article's reading insists on the condition that the state must instantiate rational freedom and ethical life; once this condition is violated by illiberal or particularistic agendas, the legitimacy of bureaucratic obedience becomes morally void.

¹⁴ There would be much more to say about similarities and differences between the concept of Weber and Hegel. Here the following must suffice: While Hegel and Weber are typically seen as opposing figures in the theory of bureaucracy – one normative and philosophical, the other empirical and diagnostic – a closer comparison reveals striking commonalities at the level of organizational analysis. As Shaw (1992) and Gale & Hummel (2003) argue, Weber's ideal type of legal-rational bureaucracy closely mirrors the institutional features prescribed by Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right*. Both emphasize functional specialization, hierarchical authority, impersonal procedures, recruitment based on merit, and professional discipline as core elements of bureaucratic organization. For Weber, these traits reflect the technical rationalization of authority and the efficient administration of modern states, albeit at the risk of alienation – the “iron cage”. For Hegel, they enable the realization of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) by ensuring that public administration serves universal rather than particular interests. What distinguishes them is thus not the structural model (how they conceive bureaucratic structure and organization) but the normative meaning attached to it. Weber views bureaucracy as a necessary but morally ambivalent product of modernity, while Hegel sees it as an ethically indispensable institution. Yet Weber's model can be read, in structural terms, as a secularized version of Hegel's rational design. This “unpaid” (Gale & Hummel, 2003) intellectual debt complicates simplistic contrasts and suggests a shared commitment to the bureaucratic form as central to the coherence and functioning of the modern state.

and deliberative mediation. This normative vision resonates with the work of Friedrich (1952; 1960), Waldo (1952), Etzioni-Halevy (2013), Olsen (2006), and others. Within this intellectual tradition, bureaucrats are conceived not simply as rule-followers but as trained citizens engaged in an ongoing, participatory process of governance. Discretion, in this view, is not a liability to democratic accountability but a resource for realizing democratic values – provided it is exercised within a framework of constitutional norms and public deliberation (see also Bauer, Brandsen *et al.*, 2025).

TABLE 1. CONTRASTING BUREAUCRATIC ETHICS

Dimension	Instrumental-Bureaucratic Ethos	Liberal-Institutional Ethos
Organizational Form	Hierarchical, top-down	Institutionalized, reflexive hierarchy
Politics – Admin Relation	Strict separation, directive relationship	Normative interdependence, mediation
Rationality	Instrumental, procedural (techne)	Ethical, interpretive (phronesis)
Discretion	Deviant, to be constrained	Essential, to be exercised responsibly
Motivation	External accountability, compliance	Commitment to public purpose and ethical norms
Democratic Anchorage	Weak – ensured via control and oversight	Strong – built on normative trust and integrity
Role of Bureaucrat	Executor of political will	Mediator of constitutional and civic values

Source: Own compilation. One finds similar juxtapositions (explicitly and implicitly) in many PA accounts – see among others – Waldo (1952), Mosher (1968), Nabatchi *et al.* (2011).

Such a distinction between instrumental vs. liberal is not meant to imply that one tradition is intrinsically superior. Rather, it illuminates the assumptions underlying divergent views of bureaucratic responsibility. The instrumental ethos presupposes a political context of stable democratic institutions and principled political leadership – conditions that may no longer be taken for granted in an era of democratic backsliding. The liberal-institutional ethos, by contrast, foregrounds the normative function of bureaucracy in sustaining constitutional democracy, especially under stress (Arendt, 1963; 1968). In doing so, it reclaims the semi-autonomous role of civil servants as ethical agents tasked with defending – not merely administering – the public good (Terry, 2003).

Recognizing these traditions can help reorient public administration education and ethics. It allows us to move beyond the false choice between loyalty and autonomy and to begin cultivating a democratic professionalism anchored in constitutional values, ethical judgment, and civic responsibility. The point to be made is simple: in times of illiberal drift, the normative resources of the liberal-institutional ethos – and the Hegelian tradition that underpins it – deserve renewed scholarly attention and pedagogical investment.

6. CONCLUSION: BEYOND NEUTRALITY – HEGELIAN IDEAS FOR AN ACTIVATING BUREAUCRATIC ETHOS

The rise of illiberal rule presents not only a political but also a profound ethical challenge for civil servants. Traditional bureaucratic ethics, rooted in Weberian, neo-Kantian ideals of neutrality and hierarchical subordination, are inadequate to address political regimes that intend to undermine the (democratic) constitutional order from within (Rutgers & Schreurs, 2004; Bauer, 2025; Yesilkagit *et al.*, 2024). In such contexts, the principle of bureaucratic neutrality risks becoming complicity in overthrowing the liberal democratic order. Such a risk – which, unfortunately, has shifted from a remote hypothesis to a reality (Bauer *et al.*, 2021) – calls for renewed scrutiny by public administration theory, particularly concerning the normative role and ethical

obligations of bureaucrats under conditions of illiberal rule. This article has sought to contribute to the debate by reintroducing Hegel's perspective on bureaucracy, particularly his conception of the relationship between the state and the bureaucratic apparatus (Shaw, 1992).

It is important to note in that context that classical moral theorizing as a basis for bureaucratic behavior, especially following Kant, puts the emphasis on the individual conscience as the locus of justified disobedience or any form of rightful resistance to unprincipled commands. That means that also when a democratic order gets deliberately undermined by those legally in power, i.e., those whom the bureaucrats ought to serve, the bureaucrats in their role as public officials would need to play along.¹⁵ Weber's portrayal of the bureaucrat as a "cog in a machine" aligns closely with Kant's notion of the private use of reason (Rutgers & Schreurs, 2004), where individuals must obey institutional commands within their official role. However, both Kant and Weber recognize a residual moral agency in the public use of reason – that is, the bureaucrat as a citizen retains the right to criticize institutional failings outside office hours.¹⁶ This dual structure ultimately leaves however little conceptual space for justifying bureaucratic resistance to illiberal transformation from within the administrative role itself (Hill, 1992; Korsgaard, 1996) – a conceptual tension that severely limits normative defenses of civil servant autonomy under illiberal regimes if one wants to follow Weber and Kant.

It is no exaggeration to say that the Weberian position, so skeptical about any form of bureaucratic non-obedience in service, represents the dominating mainstream, if not in political philosophy, then in the social science scholarship about bureaucratic structure and agency (Fry & Raadschelders, 2013). This chapter has, however, sought to demonstrate that approaches in the Weberian tradition give insufficient attention to the implications of systematically manipulating bureaucratic structures to produce illiberal outcomes and facilitate the transformation of a democratic regime into its autocratic opposite. As a result, the assumption that governments are entitled to unconditional bureaucratic loyalty – even when governmental directives conflict with constitutional norms and basic democratic values – requires more systematic and critical examination in public administrative discourse (Terry, 2015; Stivers & DeHart-Davis, 2022).

As argued throughout this article, Hegel offers a partial resolution to the moral dilemma that emerges in both Kant's and Weber's restrictive accounts of individual agency.¹⁷ In both views, ethical judgment remains an individual burden, often exercised in tension with institutional roles. By contrast, Hegel embeds ethical life ("Sittlichkeit") within the institutional structures of society – and the state is seen as the condition in which individuals come to recognize their freedom. Bureaucrats constitute a "universal class", trained to transcend private interests and enact the rational constitution of this state which enables its members to live fully ethical lives, aligned with the rational norms of family, civil society, and the political community. Rather than relying on personal conscience or responsibility alone, Hegel's vision locates normative agency within the cultivated practices of public administration, which need to serve this ethical state to come to being. This institutionalist

¹⁵ Kant's moral philosophy entails a characteristic tension between the absolutism of duty and the political imperative of lawful order. In "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Philanthropy", Kant (1996a) maintains that it is always morally wrong to lie – even to a murderer at the door seeking to harm an innocent person – on the grounds that lying violates the categorical imperative and undermines the moral law, regardless of consequences. This strict deontological position prioritizes universalizability and the formal integrity of truth-telling over situational moral intuitions. At the same time, in his political writings such as "Perpetual Peace" (Kant, 1991) and "The Metaphysics of Morals" (Kant, 1996b), Kant recognizes the reality of unjust or despotic governments but argues against revolutionary disobedience, insisting instead that legal reform must occur through rational public discourse within the bounds of existing law. This produces an unresolved ambiguity: while individuals are expected to act according to conscience and uphold moral law even against unjust state commands, they are also prohibited from undermining the legal order through acts of civil disobedience. Later Kantian interpretations attempt to soften this rigidity by distinguishing between lying and withholding truth, or by framing resistance in terms of moral autonomy rather than political rebellion (Hill, 1992). In contrast, Hegel treats the ethical life (Sittlichkeit) as embedded in institutional structures and sees the state not merely as a legal framework but as the actualization of ethical reason. Whereas Kant draws a sharp line between moral autonomy and public law, Hegel views the state – at least in its rational form – as the medium through which individual freedom is realized, thereby reducing the space for a conscience-based opposition to state authority – but this, as I argue in this chapter, only as long as the state keeps its "rational form".

¹⁶ Immanuel Kant distinguishes between the private and public uses of reason in his essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* (Kant, 1784). The private use of reason refers to reasoning within a specific institutional role (e.g., a civil servant or clergy member), where conformity to authority is expected. In contrast, the public use of reason denotes the individual's role as a scholar or citizen addressing the public, where one is free – and morally obligated – to exercise critical reason independently of institutional constraints.

¹⁷ Kant, and the Neo-Kantian framework adopted by Weber, emphasize the primacy of individual moral autonomy – whether grounded in universal moral law (Kant) or in the ethic of responsibility under conditions of value pluralism (Weber) (see O'Neill, 1990).

approach resonates with contemporary theorists such as Heath (2020) and Olsen (2006), who similarly conceptualize bureaucratic discretion as a legitimate and ethically structured form of public reasoning.¹⁸

In that sense a Hegelian reading of bureaucratic ethos offers a productive counterpoint to dominant Kantian and Neo-Kantian frameworks. Whereas Kant – and later Weber – anchor moral responsibility in individual conscience, abstracted from institutional context, Hegel locates ethical agency within the rational structure of the state whose ultimate reason is to provide a higher level of freedom to all of its members. This is a crucial difference. Not to be misunderstood, Hegel does not provide a theory of bureaucratic resistance. But his philosophy paves the way for a form of institutional “collective” disobedience – one that becomes relevant when the state no longer embodies universal principles but instead enforces particularistic interests. While not systematically theorized by Hegel, this possibility opens a conceptual space largely absent in both Kantian individualism and Weberian functionalism.

From such an interpretation of Hegel an intellectual line can be drawn to the neo-Hegelianism critique formulated by, for example, the Frankfurt School or thinker like Hannah Arendt. By neo-Hegelian critique I mean the Frankfurt School’s immanent use of Hegelian social theory to expose how modern, rationalized institutions – rather than reconciling freedom and authority – can transform reason into domination and systematically neutralize ethical judgment. The thinking of Hannah Arendt (although neither a member of the Frankfurt School nor a straightforward Hegelian) also converges with such a neo-Hegelian line especially insofar as she challenges the moral self-understanding of bureaucratic obedience.¹⁹ Arendt rejects the dualism between the private role of bureaucratic compliance and the public exercise of moral reason. In her analysis of the Eichmann trial (Arendt, 1963), she restates the Kantian categorical imperative in a radically transformed way: “No one has the right to obey”.²⁰ This formulation denies bureaucrats the moral alibi of institutional role-playing and insists instead on the responsibility of individuals to judge and act autonomously, even when acting as part of a collective within highly hierarchical and rationalized systems. In this sense, Arendt’s position resonates less with orthodox Kantianism or Hegelian reconciliation with state authority than with a neo-Hegelian position which expose how ethical judgment can be neutralized under conditions of systemic domination and ideological conformity.²¹

Building on this critical lineage, also O’Leary’s (2006) concept of “guerrilla government” and works about “administrative evil” (Adams & Balfour, 2014) bring Arendt’s insight into the context of liberal democratic governance.²² These contributions highlight ethically motivated noncompliance not primarily as civil disobedience but as a form of practical resistance rooted in professional judgment and localized ethical concern. What is often missed, however, is that this kind of resistance – although ethically grounded – remains focused on policy-level harm rather than the defense of institutional democratic integrity itself. In an era of democratic backsliding, Arendt’s uncompromising stance reminds us, in my view, that moral responsibility cannot be deferred to systems, and that preserving the constitutional order requires precisely the kind of nonconformist individual agency Arendt radically demanded (Arendt, 1968).

With view to lessons to be learned for public administration education, it follows that if we assume that bureaucracies today increasingly have to operate under growing normative strain amid democratic erosion, our ethical reasoning must respond and provide for activating professional resistance against illiberal

¹⁸ The contrast drawn here between Kant and Hegel should be understood as ideal-typical. Both acknowledge the moral autonomy of individuals, but whereas Kant emphasizes individual conscience as external to institutional roles, Hegel locates ethical reasoning within the institutional order itself. Bureaucratic agency, in this Hegelian frame, is not opposed to the state but a constitutive part of its rationality.

¹⁹ While Hegel and Arendt both advocate the ethical importance of judgment, they arrive at this insight through different philosophical routes. Arendt’s critique of bureaucratic obedience emphasizes personal moral responsibility in the face of totalitarianism, whereas Hegel envisions ethical life as embedded within institutional roles. This chapter does not claim a direct continuity, but rather identifies complementary emphases on normative agency in times of institutional degradation.

²⁰ Hannah Arendt, interview by Joachim Fest, *Zur Person*, ZDF, 1964, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GN6rzHemaY0>. Arendt states, “No one has the right to obey”, alluding to Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative and the moral responsibility of the individual, particularly in the context of totalitarian regimes. Arendt’s formulation was meant as a moral provocation, not as a systematic framework for administrative ethics. Its application to public administration education therefore requires careful contextualization (Hejka-Ekins, 1988; Menzel, 1997).

²¹ A fuller engagement with the neo-Hegelian–Marxist critiques lies beyond the scope of this chapter. However, they point to a critical line of inquiry that warrants further exploration, particularly concerning the erosion of moral agency under conditions of administrative normalization and ideological closure. See Horkheimer (1947), Adorno & Horkheimer (2002), Marcuse (1964).

²² Theories of “administrative evil” (Adams & Balfour, 2014) similarly reveal how ordinary individuals, shielded by bureaucratic routines and role expectations, become complicit in moral atrocities through what Adorno would call radical conformism. These traditions converge on the idea that modern bureaucratic systems, unless actively contested by autonomous judgment, enable ethical abdication.

transformation. This is not a call for politicized training, but for a broader normative philosophical formation – contrasting and aligning Weber with previous (Kant, Hegel) and posterior (Frankfurt School, Arendt, Waldo, Adams & Balfour, O’Leary) positions in order to reflect on the scope conditions of Weber’s account of bureaucratic organization and agency. It appears clear: any Hegelian-inspired conception of bureaucratic guardianship must therefore remain tightly bound to constitutional legality, procedural proportionality, and robust ex post accountability, in order to prevent ethical judgment from sliding into bureaucratic overreach or politicized obstruction.²³ Such reasoning therefore demands preparing future administrators not only with technical competence, but with the capacity to ask under what conditions the state retains its legitimacy – and when it does not. In this light, Hegel’s contribution is about reclaiming the ethical vocation of public administration at a moment when that vocation is increasingly under threat.

To end with a personal note. I am aware that following the Hegelian line is not without its difficulties. It presupposes a degree of institutional coherence, normative consensus, and civic formation that may not hold in all contemporary bureaucracies. It also risks idealizing the rationality of the state in ways that obscure power asymmetries, bureaucratic inertia, or exclusionary dynamics. Yet despite these tensions, I believe the Hegelian perspective remains worth revisiting – if only to challenge the boundaries of the Weberian paradigm and to reopen the question of what ethical responsibility means for those who govern in the name of the law. These reflections are offered not as final answers but as a contribution to a broader and overdue debate about the normative capacities and democratic responsibilities of the administrative state.

FINANCING

This work is supported by ERC grant (LIBRAD, Grant Agreement n.º 101200219). Funded by the European Union. Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency. Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

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²³ For approaches on how the democratic legitimacy and ethical resilience of public administration can be institutionally secured, see the work of Anthony Bertelli and colleagues on structural integrity (Bertelli & Falletti, 2025) as well as Christopher Koliba on diagnostic tools (Koliba, 2026). Relatedly, the EU-funded RADAR project (Renewing Administration through Democratic Anchorage Reforms) explores how public administrations can be democratically anchored through institutional reforms, administrative narratives, and professional education (<https://theradarproject.eu/>).

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