



Examining the Imperial Game: A Critical Evaluation of Bureaucratization in the Danish Empire, 1770-1900

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Abstract

The research paper compares the martial strategies of formidable powers, such as the British and Spanish empires, with those of the Danish Empire, which relied on bureaucracy as its main form of power. It shows how Denmark kept control over the European colonial territories such as Greenland, Iceland, and the Danish West Indies that were located across large distances despite having a small size and limited resources through the nomination of an efficient record-keeping mechanism, the establishment of a sound tax system, and efficient centralized administrative structures. According to Weber's bureaucratic theory and historical institutionalism, this paper assesses reforms conducted during absolutism in Denmark, where concerns were placed on meritocracy, accountability, and professional bureaucracy. These actions impacted contemporary Scandinavian government structures, evident in their openness and notable lack of corruption. Additionally, they contributed to imperial stability. The research paper elaborates on the effectiveness of the Danish model, identifying areas where future studies are still pending, and suggesting how bureaucratic governance impacted colonial societies and how centralised systems at that time can work in the face of geographical differences. These topics address the centrality of administrative effectiveness in historical and contemporary governance systems.

Keywords: Danish Empire, bureaucracy, governance, meritocracy, imperial administration, Scandinavian governance.



Introduction

In the domain of the state structure, many gigantic empires aimed to seize power with the help of armies and war. But the Danish empire engraved its lane with a silent, but no less powerful tool than any military tool, Bureaucracy. Unlike the huge British or Spanish empires, which depended more on the use of force, the Danish empire was relatively small, and the strength and political power of the empire lay more emphasis on the pen. In this respect, the empire bore and wielded the management of its realms with bureaucratic structure and decision-making efficiency, with records, orders, and documents rather than armed forces.

Today, Denmark, along with other Scandinavian states, is regarded as a model of an efficient, very transparent and corruption-free state. In the world, Denmark is often listed as the least corrupt country by the international organization, International Transparency, in its Corruption Perception Index. This well-known reputation has its foundation in the Danish Empire's penchant for systematic management. Originally, during the 1700s and 1800's, the empire of Denmark was spread over the North Atlantic, the Caribbean and parts of the Indian Ocean. Colonialism was diversely spread throughout the most distant regions, and managing them needed a clearer rather than a harsh empire. The empire had to work and manage these lands by subjugating people and their taxes, as well as all business activities.

From 1750 to 1814, the bureaucratic structure of the Danish Empire enhanced itself in that it began to set up better records and distinct chains of command in its empire. It led to regularity and regulation of such far-flung territories as Greenland, Iceland and the Danish West Indies. This colonial administration also provided detailed documentation of trade articles, production and proper mechanisms, but relatively good governance over faraway lands. In this research paper, the researcher will look at how the Danish Empire employed bureaucracy to keep its control and power during a time when the military was arguably the best way of exercising power. Besides that, it will describe how Denmark can maintain the democratic traditions that allowed it to become the least corrupt country with a strict bureaucratic hierarchy in the international world. The Danish Empire and its manner of ruling, especially as its emphasis on administration over military might argues for the structure of an empire. Denmark, unlike Britain or Spain, used more bureaucratically oriented methods to rule the expanded territories of the empire. After defining Danish imperial governance in terms of its bureaucratic processes, this research comparatively interrogates the literature on absolutist and present-day reforms throughout the imperial period. A comparative perspective highlights the differences between the bureaucratic administration of the Danish Empire and the military strategies of other empires

Organization as an Instrument of Management

Another peculiarity of the Danish Empire was its ability to maintain control of its lands with the help of bureaucratic structures. As Lind (2012) and Bjerre Jensen (1987) claimed, this strategy was needed because Denmark's military forces were weaker in comparison to most empires. The policies by which the Danish Empire, with colonies all over the North Atlantic, including Greenland and the Danish West Indies, governed its colonies reflect rationality and methodical record-keeping, efficient taxes, and trade supervision (Østergaard, 2010; Knudsen, 2000). The Imperial administration depended on a bureaucratic structure in Denmark that provided not only continuity but also control from



a distance, unlike Britain or Spain, where imperial administration depended on military conquest and garrisons. Due to this administrative efficiency, the empire was able to hold its colonies well, and it did not strain its resources greatly because of this efficiency. Apart from putting some order into governmental affairs, these techniques provided the basis for the Danish history of well-run administration.

Reforms During the Absolutist Era

The transformation of the government in the Danish Empire was marked by the adoption of Absolutism in 1660. The nobility had a great deal of administrative power in Denmark previously under a tradition called *Adelaide*, meaning nobility rule (Wolter, 1982). Stemming from the political crisis of 1660, deepened by military reverses and turbulent economic conditions, there emerged a constitutional change under King Frederick III. Denmark centralised its monarchy to some of the highest levels in Europe when the King's Law of 1665 made the king all-powerful (Lind, 2000; Tønnesen, 2013). These changes altered the administrative structure of the empire in a very big way. Monarch rights were substituted by merit to provide appointments that tried to reduce the aristocracy's influence in political proceedings (Ihalainen & Sennefelt, 2011). The administration was divided into *Kollegier*, or professional bureaus, each of which was assigned certain functions such as diplomacy, commerce, and finance. Since civil personnel were henceforth directly reporting to the monarchs, not the local noble ambitions, this was, of course, efficient, but also ensured loyalty to the king.

Measures of Accountability and Anti-Corruption

Based on the Danish Empire's overview, the two main departments of the Empire's administration were accountability and anti-corruption. The monarchy's vigorous attempt to maintain authority over its officials was seen in the establishment of the Generalizable office, whose main responsibility is to investigate cases of abuses of power within the government (Jespersen, 2000). The Romanisation of the Danish crown was capable of preventing corruption since it endangered many other European empires of the period through centralizing monitoring. For instance, Denmark insisted on status and accomplishment in choosing its officials, while France tendered out administration appointments, which led to corruption and stagnation (Bjerre Jensen, 1987). Moreover, this strategy enhanced the administration's effectiveness and created the basis of responsible and legal governance that modern Danish administrative systems rest upon it (Østergaard, 2008).

The Bureaucratic Tradition Today

Loci of considerable interest for scholars of today, Scandinavian governance can easily be compared with the Danes' prose of the 17th century. Since the post-2012, Denmark has never been listed by Transparency International as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. During the imperial era, Denmark promoted values such as being open, merit-based, and the rule of law. It has to be noted that academics such as Østergaard (2008) have pointed out how the efficiency, and, specifically, the responsivity of the current governmental structures of Denmark, which at least in part stemmed from the administrative changes of the absolutist period. Due to such a high priority in Denmark's governance model for administrative professionalism and efficiency, it could change with time. The Scandinavian model of governance, which was developed in the period of the social democratic welfare state, stresses equality as the inherent characteristic of



governance; other priorities include the principles of transparency and public accountability.

Lastly, perhaps comparing Denmark's bureaucracy to other small European empires, Dutch or Portuguese, will offer some useful perspectives on how bureaucracy sustains imperial power.

Lessons to be Learnt from the Danish System

Research Gap

Despite the extensive research conducted on Denmark's bureaucratic governance, significant questions remain unaddressed. Notably, the impact of the Danish bureaucratic system on colonial societies, especially in Greenland and the Danish West Indies, has been largely overlooked and demands further examination. The emperor's administrative functions have been well studied by scholars, but the effects of these practices on local communities and colonial institutions have not been adequately explored. Second, more research is needed to determine the extent to which Denmark's highly centralised bureaucratic system is responsive to its several regions. As can be gathered from the above-mentioned administrative practices, how did these practices transform to enable them to respond to distinct colonial settings? There is more to learn about the appointed flexibility in the Danish bureaucratic systems that further helps in understanding whether bureaucracy was effective in imperial rule or not.

In an attempt to fill up these gaps, this paper looks at how Denmark's bureaucratic structures affected both its colonies and its governance. The study aims to offer a more complex picture of the administrative procedures of the Danish Empire by concentrating on the sociopolitical dynamics inside these regions. The study also looks at how flexible these systems were, emphasising how centralised governance was modified to work in various colonial settings.

Research Objectives

1. To understand the practical workings of bureaucratic political structures that governed the territories and formed the Danish Empire.
2. To explore how Danish bureaucratic norms function in preserving the empire when there is no massive army.
3. To examine the impact of Danish imperial bureaucracy on the modern Scandinavian state.

Research Questions

1. In which ways did bureaucracy help the Danish Empire to exercise power over its colonies?
2. How did Denmark's reliance on a bureaucratically governed system compare to a militant power structure of larger empires?
3. How has the governance style of the Danish Empire played a role in the development of modern Scandinavian government systems?

Theoretical Framework

The two theories that frame the study are Weber's bureaucratic theory and historical institutionalism. Historical institutionalism provides an understanding of how the bureaucratic measures of the Danish Empire influenced the paradigm shift in modern Scandinavian governance. Such organizational means reflect the empire's success and existence in implying a well-structured bureaucratic system rather than brute military might, which, according to Weber's bureaucratic theory, is the epitome of a successful organization.



Historic Overview of Denmark

Denmark is home to one of the world's oldest empires, with a rich history of nation-building. During the Middle Ages, Denmark and other Nordic nations emerged as strong monarchies (Bregnsbo & Villads Jensen 2005). Around 960, the Danish king embraced Christianity, and the Catholic Church significantly influenced the formation of the kingdom until the Lutheran Reformation in 1536. The Kalmar Union was a state uniting Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, predominantly governed by Denmark. From Northern Germany to the North Cape and Greenland to Western Russia, this union was the biggest nation in Europe. But when Sweden quit the union, Denmark became a mid-sized European state (Østergaard 2010; Knudsen 2000). Denmark comprised Norway due to the Napoleonic wars, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland, Schleswig and Holstein, and other colonies between the early 16th and early 19th centuries (Bregnsbo & Villads Jensen 2005). Denmark shrank in size after losing Schleswig and Holstein in 1864 and Norway in 1814.

The Early Modern Danish State and the Transition to Administrative Reorganization After Absolutism

The establishment of governmental institutions was significantly influenced by the Lutheran Reformation in 1536. The Danish king took on responsibilities that had previously been managed by the church, becoming the head of the church himself, which led to an expansion of the state's administrative authority. Denmark developed military aims due to its antagonism with Sweden. The need for increased civil administration resulted from the necessity of collecting taxes to finance military operations (Lind 2012; Glete 2002). Denmark and Sweden were heavily armed by the 17th and 18th centuries, which greatly increased the administrative reach of the state (Lind 2012; Bregnsbo 1997, 17-22).

There was a large peasantry, an urban middle class, and a minor nobility in early modern Denmark. Before absolutism in 1660, the majority of government posts and considerable authority were held by aristocrats. The term *adelsvælde*, which means rule by the nobility, refers to the years 1536–1660 (Wolter 1982). In 1658, territorial losses resulting from Danish-Swedish battles weakened Denmark's grip over the Baltic Sea and nearly led to Sweden's complete conquest. Following economic downturns and military setbacks, nobility ceded some authority to the monarch. In 1660, King Frederick III took the role of a hereditary sovereign with the support of the bourgeoisie and ecclesiastical estates, and in 1665, the King's law established absolute monarchy, giving the king full legislative and executive power (Lind 2000, 160-165; Tønnesen 2013, 11-20). After 1660, the king aimed to reduce the power of the nobility and create a more centralized government. A merit-based system for civil servants was established, reducing noble influence. The administration was reorganized into military and civil branches, focusing on professional qualifications. Social equality and meritocracy in the civil service were made possible by the opening of land ownership and high positions to citizens based on merit rather than noble background (Ihalainen & Sennefelt, 2011). The king had the power to appoint officials, ensuring loyalty and efficiency. Appointments became based on qualifications rather than personal connections. The administration aimed to maintain a loyal bureaucracy to support the king's goals. As seen in Sweden, civil administration was organized into departments, or *Kollegier*, according to professional rather than geographic divisions (Gøbel 2000, 103-107; Jørgensen & Westrup 1982, 25-30). With the formalisation of this system and the requirement that candidates submit documentation of their training and credentials, the



emphasis shifted from personal relationships to merit (Bjerre Jensen 1987, 5590, 129, 131). Capability was still necessary even though some positions were sold to fund wars and administrative structures during 1700–1701 and 1715–1716. Denmark was spared the corruption that characterised France's auction-based system, in which the highest bidder was awarded posts (Bjerre Jensen 1987, 283–305). The changes after 1660 aimed to create a legal and accountable government. Although there were exceptions to strict rules, Denmark's administration fostered a state governed by law, with civil servants accountable to the king. (Bjerre Jensen 1987, 296–304).

The Development of Denmark's Administrative Frameworks After Absolutism

After the reforms initiated even in 1660, the central government was organised in departments or Kollegier under the profession, not geographically. It ensured that sensitive areas of concern, such as trade, taxes, and state affairs, were well managed. These features included the king's absolute prerogative to appoint officials, which offered him the opportunity to select loyal, efficient and revenue-conscientious bureaucrats instead of noblemen born and bred (Gøbel, 2000; Jørgensen & Westrup, 1982). During this time, the Generalfiskal office became an important tool for monitoring and prosecuting corruption in the public service. This agency reinforced crown sovereignty over administrative activities by bringing supervision and assurance of responsibility to one agency (Jespersen, 2000). But besides reducing corruption, they have buoyed professionalism and good government.

Administration's Role in Strengthening Imperial Power

Greenland, Iceland, as well as the Danish West Indies were otherwise partially dependent territories of Denmark. As Østergaard (2010) pointed out, due to record keeping, tax collection, trade, etc., the empire was able to govern these provinces without much need to fight wars. Nevertheless, these bureaucratic means still provided a relative stability in the Danish colonies and, generally, this empire was not as large as, for instance, British or Spanish ones (Knudsen, 2000).

Meritocracy Versus Aristocracy in the Danish Civil Service

The administrative positions had been largely dominated by the aristocrats, but with the reforms, they were decentralised, thus providing the bourgeois persons an opportunity. As well as raising efficiency, this merit-based hiring also made civil servants more dependent on the monarchy and, as a result, fostered loyalty. Only one-tenth of the royal officials were noblemen by the early years of the nineteenth century; the majority of them were professionals who preferred bureaucracy over politics (Gøbel, 2000). Meanwhile, the practice of other European countries, like France, which tended to annual sales of offices and so experienced rampant corruption and inefficiency, Denmark moved toward the merit-based civil service as early as 1671 (Bjerre Jensen, 1987). Besides, this meritocratic method increased government throughout the Danish Empire in its prosperity but also created grounds for modern Scandinavian administrative systems, which are famous for their efficiency, transparency, etc.

The Role of Bureaucracy in Sustaining Imperial Control

This suggests that, unlike other empires, the Danish Empire was able to exercise its power over distant lands because its form of governance was bureaucratic. The administrative structure of the Danish state allowed the country to maintain its dominance without requiring a powerful military, as different from such large empires as the British and Spanish ones, which mostly relied solely on military power to achieve this goal. This distinction is as important as ever because Denmark is a



relatively small state with limited resources to commit to military power politics compared to more assertive peers (Østergaard, 2010; Knudsen, 2000).

A larger tendency of government in Europe during this period is towards the changes that occurred after the bout of reforms in 1660 of making the bureaucracy more centralised and the officials better qualified meritocratically. Apart from rationalising the administration, such reforms decrease corruption and contribute to the development of an accountable government. The focus on professional certifications was another apparent success in Denmark because it ensured a stable and efficient government, more than France's auction-based government jobs (Bjerre Jensen, 1987). Tønnesen (2013) and Ihalainen and Sennefelt (2011) support this view by positing that the professionalization of the civil service can be emphasized as peculiar because it was under the Danish King, which became the basis for the modern model of the Scandinavian governance, which is considered to be one of the least corrupt and most open (Østergaard, 2008). Still, based on the findings of the discussion, which focus on the effectiveness of the bureaucratic model, it is possible to identify many limitations of the existing literature. For example, research into how Danish bureaucracy affected local governance in its colonies has not been done much. Though bureaucratic control was held over Greenland, Iceland and the West Indies, the socio-political integration's effects on the local people also deserve more consideration. It will also be helpful for future research to understand further how these bureaucratic systems engaged with or impacted upon local customs, wealth, and political systems

It is not clear how adjustable Denmark's bureaucratic disposition was in disparate colonial contexts, even though it won the battle in matters of colonialism and maintaining authority over colonies. Further research should be devoted to the issues connected with the ways of implementing the homogeneous administrative system in the many places which have diverse local conditions and circumstances. Perhaps other research could look at how petitions for resistance or governance localised were about the Danish bureaucracy and how it was either changed or hindered in different areas. To put it bluntly, the bureaucracy conducted by the administration of the Danish Empire extended the reign of stability and authority. The experience of such consequences on local societies and the options for this kind of administrative construction in other colonies require further investigation. Perhaps more study in these fields of bureaucrats' research would provide an additional understanding and information concerning the Danish Empire's bureaucratic influence on today's forms of governmental structures.

Tackling Previous Research Deficiencies

Even though major advancements have improved the understanding of Denmark's bureaucratic government, researchers have often neglected the impact of these reforms on the colonial span of local governance. For instance, there is no information on how Greenland or the Danish West Indies' locals navigate the Danish administrative system. For improved understanding of the sociopolitical dynamics' operative in colonies, pre-Julian future research could examine whether such bureaucratic structures were advantageous or disadvantageous to the local populace. A final gap is the openness of Denmark's bureaucratic style across a range of geographic environments. The change of a centralised administrative structure that was developed for the internal governing of Denmark: How did this change meet the needs of a colony? A detailed study of this flexibility could likely produce material regarding the strengths and weaknesses of bureaucratic rule as applied to an imperial context in particular.



Findings

Lacking the military power that any established empire had, Denmark depended solely on bureaucracy to ensure it continued controlling their overseas territories. The type of colony that could be located in different geographical locations, such as Greenland, Iceland and Danish West Indies, could be well managed by the empire due to the good administrative systems that included appropriate taxes and record record-keeping system. Due to Denmark's size and the shortage of resources, the Danish pursued a bureaucratic approach to governing, unlike the British and Spanish empires that paid priority to military power. The policies adopted after 1660, and more so in the absolutist era, were very important in the accomplishment of the centralisation of the government. These reforms stressed the principle of a career bureaucracy and limited the ability of the high nobility to capture these posts, i.e., made these offices competitive by merit rather than birthright. Such a transformation towards a professional bureaucracy can be seen in the formation of the main government departments, known as Kollegier, which helped rationalize the decision-making process and enhance the efficiency of the state.

Although Denmark may be small, its keen reliance on administration helped it avoid the ruinous corruption that other European empires had. For example, Denmark, which has attempted to stress qualifications and accountability, minimised the risks of corruption compared to the French approach of posting most of the government positions for bids. Denmark's foundation of the modern ethic of not having even a tint of corruption was laid with the focus on law and order and an organised bureaucracy.

Some issues need further research. Much research has yet to be done into how this bureaucratic approach of Denmark affected the societies of the colonies, especially the structures of governance and the interplays between colonial entities. Also, Denmark's administrative procedures were impeccable, but the general applicability of such bureaucracies over such wildly dissimilar regions remains an area of interest.

Conclusion

It also presents a good case for the utility of bureaucratic architectures in empire governing because it was organised in a way that was less militaristic than most empires, and yet, still highly bureaucratic. The Danish Empire was one of the outstanding examples of how a rational system, bookkeeping, and proper administration can cope with extensive and heterogeneous territories, unlike, for example, the British and Spanish empires that tended to use armed force most of the time. This bureaucratic strategy also empowered Denmark to control distant colonies like Greenland, Iceland, and the Danish West Indies; it also imposed a stable and comparatively open administration system, which laid the foundation of the Danish modern structure of governance and the least corrupt one. The study of the Danish case claims that bureaucracy is very crucial for achieving stable politics and sound administration in a country, which is usually considered in the exercise of imperial powers, mainly involving military factors and the economy. Besides, assisting the state in the transition to the modern civil service based on the merit system which still exercises influence on the welfare of the Scandinavian countries to this day, it was the bureaucratic experience involving the Danish Empire that was mandatory for preserving control over the territory. Hence, in addition to stressing the importance of institution building exercising empire, the Danish model of governance will demonstrate how orderly rule can provide an efficient way of attaining imperial stability without resort to violence.



Recommendations

Based on the bureaucratic model of Denmark, political leaders in the emerging states should look at this nation's interest as having strong institutions and policy direction. More comparisons of bureaucratic methods between militaries and non-militaries between empires could shed more light on ways of governance. The research could be continued about how other, much smaller empires invested in administrative systems for their governance, especially those beyond Europe.

Denmark can provide modern states and organisations with lessons in governing. Accountability and meritocracy binaries illustrate that smaller states can maintain efficiency and stability without using force. Moreover, because the current Scandinavian systems of government remain influenced by the imperial standards set long ago, it is possible to note that the Danish experience underlines the effectiveness of institutional reforms in the long run. Scholars and policymakers must fill more gaps in the literature, explore potential consequences of the Danish bureaucratic model, and gain an enhanced understanding of the role of administration in maintaining imperial stability and the relevance of this function in the modern world.

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