

## Proto-Bureaucracies

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**Abstract:** The emergence of bureaucracy is often described as occurring at a particular historical period in a society, as a result of the pressures of war, the improvement of communication and transportation technologies, or societywide cultural changes. But recently many scholars have drawn attention to examples of meritocratic bureaucracies in societies otherwise organized according to patrimonial logics, what I call proto-bureaucracies. In this article I investigate one aspect of proto-bureaucracies that has not been examined in the literature: in a society characterized by patrimonial relations, the sudden introduction of meritocratic principles of recruitment may be interpreted as violating the principles of rewarding loyalty or kinship. This can fragment the political coalitions necessary to sustain a proto-bureaucracy. I argue through in-depth examination of one case, and secondary analysis of several others, that to manage the problem of exclusion successful proto-bureaucracies enact performative adherence to nonmeritocratic logics while protecting their meritocratic core. I argue that understanding contemporary proto-bureaucracies can help to develop an organizational strategy for strengthening governance and reducing corruption. The main lesson of proto-bureaucracies is that effective institutions generate exclusion, but meritocratic practices can be sustained if the exclusions they generate can be addressed in other ways.

**Keywords:** bureaucracy; organizations; development; pockets of effectiveness; islands of integrity; islands of excellence

THE characteristic social form of complex societies is the bureaucracy. Public bureaucracies organize the affairs of modern states, and private bureaucracies enable the coordination of wide-reaching economic systems. The emergence of bureaucracy is often described as occurring at a particular historical period in a society, as a result of the pressures of war, the improvement of communication and transportation technologies, or societywide cultural changes (Weber [1921] 1978; Tilly 1985; Gorski 2003; Kiser and Cai 2003). But recently many scholars have drawn attention to examples of meritocratic bureaucracies in societies otherwise organized according to patrimonial logics. Historical examples of such proto-bureaucracies include the British Navy, which professionalized well over a century before other British organizations did (Fischer and Lundgreen 1975), and the Salt Inspectorate in early twentieth-century China (Strauss 1998). Contemporary examples include the Kenya Tea Development Authority (Leonard 1991), the Ministry of Finance's Directorate of Economic and Financial Cooperation and the Directorate of Statistics and Forecasting in Senegal (Johnson 2009), the Policy Analysis and Research Division in Ghana (McDonnell 2017, 2020), and other examples in many different sectors in countries across the developing world (Grindle 1997).

Proto-bureaucracies are important to examine and understand because they may form the basis for the wider spread of the bureaucratic form. Centeno (1997) argues that across Latin America, initial organizational capacity determines whether

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states can take advantage of wars to increase revenue extraction, and Ertman (1997) demonstrates that even in Europe, war only contributed to bureaucratization in societies that were characterized by a high level of initial administrative capacity and the cultural availability of the model of bureaucracy. The work of these scholars suggests the initial appearance of the bureaucratic form is necessary for its wider adoption during wartime, that is, that proto-bureaucracies necessarily precede wider bureaucratization.

Proto-bureaucracies are also important to understand for practical reasons. Societies characterized by nonmeritocratic organizations often function according to logics in which office holders behave in the interests of themselves and their kin rather than in the interests of their clients. Rather than the routine performance of tasks necessary for the smooth functioning of the economy and improvement of the lives of citizens, such organizations become sites for personal enrichment through bribery or nepotism. These practices have been found to lower economic growth, increase infant mortality and decrease life expectancy, and increase inequality. (See Olken and Pande 2012 for an overview; see also Shleifer and Vishny 1993; Mauro 1995; Paul 1995; Gambetta 1996; Larrea-Santos 1997; Rose-Ackerman 1998; Heymans and Lipietz 1999; Nwabuzor 2005; Rivkin-Fish 2005; Bertrand et al. 2007; Prasad and Zaloznaya 2021.) Proto-bureaucracies suggest that alternative models are available from within the society itself.

There is an emerging literature on bureaucracies in contexts where bureaucracy is rare, but this literature, as discussed below, does not provide a clear answer about when such bureaucracies emerge. One widespread argument is that proto-bureaucracies emerge when there is sufficient political will among policymakers to provide protection for them. However, it is not clear how “political will” is generated, or lost.

In this article I investigate one aspect of proto-bureaucracies that has not been examined in the literature: these bureaucracies need to manage the problem of exclusion. In a society characterized by patrimonial relations, the sudden introduction of meritocratic principles of recruitment may be interpreted as violating the principle of rewarding loyalty or kinship. Weber ([1921] 1978:1010) defined patrimonialism as a system in which leaders acquire authority not through election or meritocratic appointment, but by doling out patronage to followers in the form of land, animals, and protection. In this context the path to economic stability and mobility for most people comes not through education or entrepreneurship, but through loyalty to patrimonial leaders (see also Charrad and Adams 2011; Kiser and Sacks 2011:130). Where patrimonial practices are widespread, a proto-bureaucracy will function on principles that are foreign to most members of the society. Its leaders will be seen to be ineffective or disloyal for being unable or unwilling to provide jobs and opportunities for kin and supporters. This can fragment the political coalitions necessary to sustain a proto-bureaucracy.

I argue through in-depth examination of one case, and secondary analysis of several others, that proto-bureaucracies perform what I call meritocratic decoupling. The idea of “organizational decoupling” originates in the observation that organizations sometimes profess rational and bureaucratic ideals but adhere to nonrational practices. The literature concentrates on organizations in developed

countries, in societies in which rational bureaucratic forms are powerful myths that generate legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977). In contexts where these myths have not taken hold, proto-bureaucracies also exhibit decoupling, but in reverse, as the organization enacts performative adherence to nonmeritocratic logics but protects its meritocratic core. I suggest that the organization's ability to perform these dual tasks helps to sustain the necessary political coalitions, and that where these tasks fail, generating political will for the emergence or maintenance of proto-bureaucracies is more difficult. It is as if the proto-bureaucracy must cloak itself in nonbureaucratic forms to survive.

I focus on contemporary examples because the global availability of the bureaucratic form changes the analytical situation from those of historical cases. I argue that understanding contemporary proto-bureaucracies can help to develop an organizational strategy for strengthening governance and reducing corruption.

## Literature Review: The Problem of Exclusion

Over the last several decades a research literature has emerged examining well-functioning organizations—variously called “pockets of effectiveness,” “positive outliers,” and “islands of integrity”—in countries that are otherwise dominated by patrimonialism, corruption, and bureaucratic dysfunction (Daland 1981; Geddes 1990; Grindle 1997; Strauss 1998; Ochieng 2007; Crook 2010; Leonard 2010; Roll 2014; Johnson 2015; Muilerman and Vellema 2017; McCourt 2018; Matissek 2019; Peiffer and Armytage 2019; Pedersen, Jacob, and Bofin 2020; Zaloznaya 2017). The research program to examine these agencies is promising because it suggests building on approaches that are indigenous to a context and “locally owned” (Ochieng 2007:458). Many scholars have argued this is a better alternative than attempting to impose lessons learned from outside the context (de Sardan, Diarra, and Moha 2017). As Roll (2017) notes, such organizations

signify to citizens, progressive civil servants and politicians, civil society, the media and international observers that a different mode of governance and public sector management, and therefore state action, is indeed possible. In environments in which patronage politics and captured bureaucracies abound, pockets of effectiveness are also pockets of hope for a better future (P. 233).

These organizations combine personnel policies based on performance with a culture that generates a commitment to the organization's mission, even an “organizational mystique” (Grindle 1997) that leads members of the organization to believe that their organization is special and working there confers distinction. Autonomy over personnel is crucial: if given autonomy over hiring, firing, and personnel decisions, leaders of agencies can create a culture of meritocracy and commitment to the organization's mission. Other practices that shape the informal culture of these institutions are intensive training, including training abroad, and cultural and symbolic factors that enhance group togetherness, such as living in close proximity and apart from others. (Geddes 1990; Tandler and Freedheim 1994; Grindle and Hilderbrand 1995; Willis 1995; Grindle 1997; Cheng, Haggard,

and Kang 1998; Strauss 1998; Caseley 2006; Crook and Ayee 2006; Owusu 2006a, 2006b; Hout 2007; Leonard 2010; Parrado and Salvador 2011; Roll 2014:195; Johnson 2015:786, Mistree 2015; Wade 2016; McDonnell 2017; Hickey 2019; Matissek 2019; Drápalová and Di Mascio 2020; Pedersen et al. 2020; McDonnell 2020:135–64; Tyce 2020:3). Interestingly, there is no clear conclusion about the importance of high salaries to these organizations' success: some do pay more, but in many others the pay is no higher, or perhaps even lower than in organizations that are not proto-bureaucracies (Owusu 2006a, 2006b; McDonnell 2017, 2020).

Many authors conclude that these organizational characteristics ultimately depend on political support: "it is the political or personal interest of the head of state in the effective execution of a particular task that allows the public organization that is mandated with executing this task to emerge" as an effective bureaucracy (Roll 2014:195; Johnson 2015:786). This may be more likely in situations when risks to leaders are low or when multiple sources of power can be played off against each other (Mistree 2015; Tyce 2020; see also Crook and Ayee 2006; Wade 2016; Matissek 2019; Drápalová and Di Mascio 2020; Pedersen et al. 2020). Hickey (2019) usefully distills the literature into several propositions, such as that these bureaucracies

are likeliest to emerge and be sustained within policy domains that are critical to (a) basic state functioning and/or (b) the survival of political rulers . . . [and] in political settlements where power is 'concentrated', as this can lengthen the time horizons of elites and enable clear [principal]-agent relationships to develop between rulers and bureaucrats over time (Pp. 36–37).

One question that has not yet been posed explicitly in this scholarship is why citizens and politicians *do not always* support proto-bureaucracies. Why are proto-bureaucracies so unpopular that they need the protection of powerful politicians? And why are politicians only willing to support them under certain narrow conditions, such as when risks are low, or when time horizons are long—why are there risks at all? Why would anyone object to a meritocratic organization performing the task it is expected to perform?

To answer this question, I turn to an older strain of literature on corruption that explains the functions that nonmeritocratic principles of selection may fulfill in a developing country. Huntington (1968) argued that groups that are excluded by processes of modernization are integrated through practices such as patronage, which stabilizes a social system and weakens the likelihood of violent resistance. Whereas in developed countries welfare transfers perform this function, where the state is not developed enough it is performed in other ways (also Leff 1964; Leys 1965; Merton 1968). More recent ethnographic work in both anthropology and sociology has shown that patrimonial practices of bribery and nepotism are defended on their own terms as loyalty to loved ones. In situations of scarcity they are understood as a way to provide security and subsistence. Where the state is weak, they may even be necessary for survival (Walton 2013; Prasad, Borges Martins da Silva, and Nickow 2019). Although corruption has significant costs in the aggregate, for any individual it may be the rational course of action, or even the only possible course of action.

When we examine proto-bureaucracies with these ideas in mind, one aspect of their functioning becomes clear: proto-bureaucracies function through exclusion. This is often the secret to their effectiveness. For example, many authors see meritocratic recruitment based on competitive exams as the key to corruption-free bureaucracies (Evans and Rauch 1999; Panizza 2001:121; Henderson et al. 2007; Portes and Smith 2008; Dahlström et al. 2012:656; Mistree 2015:47–51). But citizens from more advantaged backgrounds are more likely to have the time to train for competitive exams, which means that “merit” is at least in part a coded marker for greater income or status (Johnson 1982:57–9; Subramanian 2015, 2019). Even if they are able to compete in such exams, many lower-income citizens may have social obligations that pressure them in different directions. As Leonard (1987) points out,

African leaders and managers . . . have large numbers of poor relatives and strong ties to disadvantaged rural communities. The values of the social exchange systems that peasant communities employed to insure themselves against risk are still strong [which produces] patronage obligations to poorer peoples and the strength of the moral pressures which they feel to fulfill them (P. 901; see also Ekeh 1975; McDonnell 2017:488; Marquette and Peiffer 2018).

In this context, those who staff proto-bureaucracies may be unusually privileged in having not only the training that allows them to succeed in competitive exams but also the luxury of passing up positions that would provide opportunities for patronage for their kin.

Proto-bureaucracies also exclude institutions—including unions and democracy—that function on the logic of egalitarianism rather than merit. Grindle (1997) argues that unions undermine effective bureaucracy because they make it “extremely difficult and costly for organizations to fire employees. In some cases, unions determine placement and salary levels. These practices place organizations under considerable constraint in finding the right person for a job and rewarding or punishing employees based on how well or poorly they perform their responsibilities” (P. 486).

Hertog (2010) finds that democracy undermines proto-bureaucracies. For Geddes (1990), favorable conditions for the creation of pockets of efficiency in Brazil included “the abolition of congress” (P. 233). Samatar and Oldfield (1995) argue that effective bureaucracy in Botswana, a country known for low corruption in a continent with generally high corruption, results from the existence of an elite aware of its collective interests, which was made possible because popular classes were not mobilized (P. 653). For Willis (1995:644–5), a decision to help a poor region of Brazil with sanitation and water projects runs counter to the needs of bureaucratic independence.

In short, proto-bureaucracies are unpopular because one consequence of their effectiveness is exclusion. For these reasons, some authors have been extremely critical of proto-bureaucracies. Haque (1997) criticizes proto-bureaucracies for being composed of people who are elite in the local context, “accustomed to Western values and lifestyles, which they acquire through Western or Westernized education, training, and upbringing” (P. 445). He suggests—logically, if these are the problems, but completely contradicting the points that other scholars make about

autonomy—that political parties should control bureaucracies more to make them more responsive. And where the scholars discussed above often suggest sending bureaucrats abroad to learn Western norms, Haque suggests “reducing their locally irrelevant foreign studies, and engaging them in an intensive re-education process, so that these elites can comprehend and empathize with the indigenous cultural context, so that they become less oligarchic, less technocratic, and more sympathetic and responsive to the norms and aspirations of the common people” (P. 453). Other authors suggest that distance from the local context can lead actors to suggest inappropriate solutions imported from the west (Ranganathan and Doering 2018) and that “calls to allow greater autonomy for enclaves of rationality in contexts where democratic politics are taking root [assume] the rational-legal order is the ideal and political order is its nemesis” (Mkandawire 2015:600).

This puts proto-bureaucracies in a different light, as technocratic, privileged, and disloyal in addition to meritocratic and rational. Meritocratic exams generate failed examinees. Hiring and firing based on performance create fired employees. Although all principles of selection, including patrimonial ones, necessarily create pools of those who are not selected, proto-bureaucracies do so in ways that violate the principles of the surrounding society. And because proto-bureaucracies draw disproportionate resources, excluded populations cannot be expected to find similar opportunities in other organizations, as they would in more developed contexts.

This highlights a question that the current scholarship has not examined systematically. If nonmeritocratic processes of selection serve functions for the wider society, and yet meritocratic proto-bureaucracies exist, how do proto-bureaucracies manage those wider social expectations? How do they handle the problem of exclusion? Explaining this may help to solve the elusive question of “political will.”

## The Case

This article examines these questions through in-depth case study of one proto-bureaucracy, the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), supplemented by secondary analysis of several other organizations.

The IITs are governmental institutions that focus on technological college-level education and have a reputation as being meritocratic, even though corruption and patrimonialism are otherwise widespread in the higher education sector in India. Studying universities is appealing because for many citizens higher education forms “their first and, arguably, most formative engagement with bureaucratic corruption” (Zaloznaya 2017:3)—the first time they are expected to deal with these issues independently, in a context that affects them individually—and may thus affect how they understand the propriety of patrimonialism or meritocracy more generally.

The IITs are also an intriguing research site because a recent expansion has brought IIT branches to areas of India characterized by patrimonialism and corruption. The IITs began as a handful of institutes established in the early post-Independence era. Five campuses were originally constructed, and since the 1990s a process of incremental expansion has brought the current number up to 23 cam-

puses, including in parts of the country that are extremely disadvantaged (Mistree 2015).

In this article I examine a “new” IIT that has been established recently and is located in a context of patrimonialism and corruption. The data consist of 54 individual interviews and four group interviews with students, faculty, administrators, and staff of the new IIT and one of the older IITs. To maintain the confidentiality of the interviewees I do not identify either campus. Interviews are referenced by identifiers preceded by “N” for the new IIT and “O” for the old IIT.

Supporters of the IITs note that IIT-educated engineers have been central to the creation of India’s globally successful software sector, from which the Indian state draws tax revenues. Critics argue that the benefits in fact flow mostly to the elite, including not only the taxpayer-funded benefits of attending and working at IITs but also the benefits from a technology sector that caters to middle-class needs and whims rather than the needs of the poor (O14, O02). The IITs train just over one percent of college students but absorb more than one-quarter of the government’s higher education budget (Sharma 2018). Many IIT graduates leave India, with 125,000 out of a total 200,000 alumni working abroad in 2006, so that Indian taxpayers are paying enormous sums to educate Silicon Valley millionaires (although this has changed more recently; see Varma and Kapur [2013]). Some argue that the successes of alumni should be attributed to the talent of individual students whom the IITs merely collect and concentrate. As research institutions the IITs do not regularly produce transformative research or technological breakthroughs.

But although the IITs may not be transformative, they accomplish their stated task: indeed, in the Indian context, it is remarkable that the vast funding that goes to the IITs is not misspent. It is slated for technological teaching and the building of campus and research facilities, and by and large, that is where the money goes. There are many criticisms of the exam-based recruitment system, but its major advantage is that it prevents recruitment based on patrimonialism, nepotism, or corruption. This simple fact is a major social accomplishment.

The key to the organizational mystique of the IITs and their meritocratic reputation is the Joint Entrance Examination (JEE), an astonishing feat of social commensuration (Ørberg 2018; Subramanian 2015, 2019; Chakravarty and Hegde 2019). Undergraduate students must rank highly on the JEE to enter the IITs, and ranks on the exam are public information. Every year more than one million students take the exam, which tests knowledge of physics, chemistry, and math, and around 10,000 are admitted to the IITs (Chakravarty and Hegde [2019], although the numbers admitted are increasing as more IITs open). Visitors to any corner of India are greeted with billboards advertising coaching institutes that promise to help paying students score high on this exam, and Bollywood movies are made about students struggling to master the JEE. An entire coaching industry has sprung up in a town called Kota in Rajasthan, to which many students migrate in order to spend a year or several years studying for the JEE. A large section of upper-, middle-, and lower-income students orient multiple years of their lives as teenagers to studying four to eight hours a day for this exam, and it provides a direction to society as a whole, lending status and mystique to science and technology. Although there is no research demonstrating the utility of the JEE as a measure of the quality of an

engineer, many in the community assume that this has been demonstrated, a leap of faith at the heart of this high-modernist enterprise. Whatever the utility of the JEE in identifying the best engineers, however, its role in preventing patrimonialism and corruption is clear. In the online supplement I discuss in more detail the reasons for thinking that the IITs are relatively free of corruption and patrimonial forms of selection.

The IITs have been the subject of an explicit debate between those who highlight the effective and meritocratic nature of proto-bureaucracies and those who highlight their exclusionary practices. Mistree (2015) comments that given the IITs' prestige and autonomy,

the faculty and administrators who run the IITs could easily neglect or even abuse their positions of power. They could admit the children of their friends and family. They could seek bribes for grades. They could decide not to give their lectures—a huge problem at other universities in India—and they could choose to forsake research. They could prioritize favoritism and parochialism instead of merit. But they do not. Instead, they make the IITs arguably the top higher education system in all of India (Pp. 189–90).

He suggests that we should learn from and build on the lessons of the IITs' meritocratic functioning.

Subramanian (2015, 2019), on the other hand, echoing criticisms of the idea of "merit" made in other contexts, describes the IITs as performing a sort of privilege laundering, translating upper-caste and upper-class benefits that are not so easily defended into the coin of merit that is easy to defend. The mechanism of this translation is the competitive exam that requires the luxury of years of study, and money and freedom for coaching in a country where most people have neither (see also Rao 2013; Fernandez 2017; Henry and Ferry 2017). Through this mechanism and the genuine sacrifice it requires from students, the system transforms 25 percent of government resources going to one percent of students into a natural right.

The new branch of the IIT brings an organization with a reputation as a meritocratic bureaucracy into a context in which there is widespread patrimonialism, nepotism, and corruption. Although India is a capitalist country with a well-established bureaucratic state, patrimonial practices are still common, especially in peripheral areas (indeed, patrimonial practices are found even in developed countries, suggesting that the distinction between patrimonialism and meritocracy is an ideal type; see Charrad and Adams 2011; Tobias Neely 2018). As the IIT system expands into these areas, Weber's ideal types of meritocracy and patrimonialism collide.

The local area of the new IIT has a reputation for corruption to such an extent that one interviewee knew what I was asking before I had finished the sentence:

Interviewer: [In this local area] the culture is kind of known for—

Respondent: Corruption? (N17; this reputation was also confirmed by N01, N08, N16, N21, N22, N23, N24, N26, N27, N30, N33, N35, N38, N39)



The area around the campus was rural before the arrival of the IIT and even includes a form of sharecropping. Local houses generally have at least some electricity but not necessarily running water or toilets, even despite recent sanitation drives, and the roads are potholed. The local per capita GDP is significantly lower than the Indian per capita GDP (N28, N29, N37).

The new IIT itself, on the other hand, is a well-groomed and expensively maintained first-world campus. The offices and classrooms are air-conditioned and have large windows overlooking the manicured lawns and trees, and the institute has its own electricity and water connections, not to mention the internet connections that allow students to attain the world-class education that makes them competitive on the technological labor market (N02).

As might be expected given the extreme socioeconomic disparities, there is a great emphasis on physical separation, and the institute's security operation is one of its main expenses (N09). A high wall separates the two worlds. Most faculty live on campus, as do all students, and rarely leave campus or develop ties with the location (N16, N38, N39, N22, N06, N18). The administration tells students not to go off campus because, in the words of one student, "like they say goons sit across the road, and they can attack any time" (N22; also N15, N23, N07). Villagers have a hard time imagining their children at the institute (N29).

Despite this, the two worlds do interact, and I heard stories of attempts at corruption and patrimonialism from the local surroundings. For example, one professor told of an unqualified candidate from the local area casually laying a gun on the professor's desk before asking to enter the PhD program (N08). Another professor recounted a case of a rejected student attempting to get a politician to intervene on his behalf (N02). Students often approach businesses in the city for sponsorships of student events, and senior students warn their juniors to reject any attempts from local businesses at soliciting bribes (N27, N33, N01).

## Findings

Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggest that "Bureaucratization is caused in part by the proliferation of rationalized myths in society" (P. 347). Organizations that adhere to these powerful myths generate formal and informal legitimacy. But these myths may not actually make sense for the task of the organization; for example, in many cases it is not clear how an organization is to behave rationally because it is not clear how to rationally evaluate the things it produces: "Increasingly, such organizations as schools, R & D units, and governmental bureaucracies use variable, ambiguous technologies to produce outputs that are difficult to appraise" (P. 354). In this situation a gap develops between organizational policy and organizational practice, with the organization making efforts to align its formal structure with the required bureaucratic elements but allowing individual actors to depart from these requirements in their actual practice in order to accomplish core tasks—"decoupling."

But what happens in contexts where rational bureaucracy is not pervasive—indeed, where alternative principles of selection are widespread and where the bureaucratic organization is the exception? One may think that such societies are beyond the scope conditions of the claim of decoupling. But interestingly, decoupling

is evident here too, but in the opposite direction: the bureaucratic organization engages in *meritocratic decoupling*, the inverse of the kind of decoupling that scholars find in developed countries. In meritocratic decoupling, the organization must show how it adheres to nonmeritocratic principles of selection. However, it then protects its meritocratic core through strategies of distancing. I call the first step “performative inclusion,” a need to show how the organization benefits the surrounding context and all those who are excluded by its meritocratic principles, and the second step “protecting the meritocratic core,” protection of core practices through symbolic distancing strategies.

The original picture of decoupling, in which a unitary environment demanding a particular form versus practices that clearly benefit the organization, leading to a durable distinction between form and practice, has been revised in subsequent scholarship. More recent research has acknowledged that organizations can face environments that make conflicting demands, such that the need to decouple can come from the environment itself (Heimer 1999). I follow the work of Bromley and Powell (2012), who argue that the distinction is not necessarily between policy and practice but between different kinds of practice. I rework the original understanding of decoupling to show that decoupling can occur between different internal practices pursued by different elements of the organization. That is, rather than official policy contradicting stated practice, different units within the organization are decoupled from one another, with some units sincerely following the patrimonial demands of the external environment and other units proceeding along different logics that contradict those patrimonial demands. I also show how these different units interact given their different logics. I show that they adopt strategies of material and symbolic distancing that prevent each from influencing the other. Moreover, contra Bromley and Powell, I argue that this form of decoupling can be highly effective for proto-bureaucracies.

### *Performative Inclusion*

Although it is easy to criticize patrimonial practices as nepotism or corruption, one may also think of them as a form of pastoral care, in which leaders provide for the material needs of those who seek out their protection. Consider the case of Nilima, a young widowed mother who is employed as a cleaner at the new IIT. Nilima’s husband had an affair and killed himself in the aftermath, leaving her with three small children, no education, and no work history. Nilima received her job not through a competitive recruitment process but through the logic of pastoral care: someone with connections realized that she needed help and recommended her for a low-skilled job at the IIT. Jobs for women are not plentiful in the area, certainly not for uneducated women, and not at the wages the IIT pays. With these wages the cleaners are able to educate their children in schools that are better than the local government schools (N28, N29, N37).

The university outsources recruitment for lower-level positions (cleaners, security guards, construction workers). The lower-level staff I spoke to could tell me nothing more about how they had been recruited than that someone they knew had

arranged it. There was no formal competitive process requiring exams, interviews, or examinations of work history (O08, N09, N17, N18, N30, N32, N36, N37).

Incorporating the local villagers in this way allows the IIT to work with the patrimonialism of the surrounding context. This is its main strategy for managing the resentments of excluded populations. Representatives of the organization argue that the presence of this richly resourced institute will yield benefits for the local population even if the local population cannot benefit as students or faculty (N04, N18, N19, N22, N26, N39).

For example, when the head of the security operation was asked how security concerns are handled, he responded,

I come across so many cases, they wanted to gain the entry. "No I want to go visit there. I want to do some construction work." Then they used to inform me, I used to go, I used to call some of them, call here and counsel them, "okay you want to supply the construction material or something kind of thing. Why it is possible? Because the IIT is there. Once it will not be there, then where will you go? In other region, the youth would be out, just roaming here and there, so your condition will be like that only. So think that—you come to me, I just show you the path, how it can be. So there is way, there is means," so they understood and they are very good friend of mine, nowadays (N15).

That is, he counsels the locals that having the IIT in their midst is a benefit to the area because the presence of this large, resource-intensive organization offers opportunities to locals such as jobs and the opportunity to provide construction materials. I emphasize that it is the head of the security operation making this argument, in response to a question about how security concerns are handled. This strategy is not just a matter of the organization's popularity in the local context but of its physical security.

The strategy is to promote the IIT as what scholars elsewhere have called an anchor institution. In retail economics "anchor tenants" are the large, well-known department stores in shopping malls that increase traffic and sales for smaller and less well-known nearby stores (Pashigian and Gould 1998:116). Similarly, a large institution can be an anchor for the development of an entire area. Scholars have shown that schools, universities, hospitals, libraries, national parks, airports, public utilities, and other large agencies can play a role in regional economic development (Adams 2003; Agrawal and Cockburn 2003; Laredo 2007; Stevens, Baker, and Freestone 2010; Powell, Packalen, and Whittington 2012; Cowell and Mayer 2013; Mersand et al. 2019). In the United Kingdom the National Health Service has been examined as an anchor tenant (Reed et al. 2019), and in the United States the Department of Homeland Security is expected to revitalize an impoverished part of Washington, DC (Cowell and Mayer 2015). These large institutions serve as employers, purchasers, and investors, including in land. Because they cannot move easily, they reassure other actors that investments in a particular location will rest on a stable economic base.

Without using the term, the new IIT has been promoting itself as an anchor institution since the campus's founding. This remains the institute's main strategy

for defusing opposition from the local context. For example, although the state and local governments were highly supportive of the new IIT, the land for the campus was acquired through a process that raised conflict among locals, with several dramatic actions hindering the work of the institute. To defuse the situation, the university promised that it would take steps to benefit the local population, including that local workers would be given preference for lower-level jobs (N08, N11, N29, N22, N37; field notes August 29, 2019).

Furthermore, the administration argues that the presence of the IIT will anchor the development of a technological corridor in the area, including a nearby airport (N19). The state government is also investing in a nearby industrial park, another major technological institute is planned, infrastructure including roads have been upgraded, and the increased activity is generating small business opportunities that have transformed what was once agricultural land (N04, N19, N26).

I call this “performative inclusion”—a strategy to highlight how the exclusions that meritocracy generates can be compatible with benefits for those who are excluded. By calling it “performative,” however, I do not imply that it is insincere or false. Even if the number of jobs provided by the IIT to lower-level staff is small, it is the case that cleaners, for example, earn significantly more than in other jobs available in the local area (N29). Cleaning jobs are given to women, and the IIT therefore offers opportunities that women in these areas otherwise would not have—a performance, but a genuine one. I call it “performative” to highlight the importance of communicating this argument to those who are excluded, sometimes in actual performances, such as between the head of the security operation and the locals, or between the administration and the locals in the wake of the land dispute (N19).

Note that for the locals, the IIT’s meritocratic nature is of no concern. It is not an element emphasized in the anchor institution strategy, which focuses simply on the fact of the organization’s wealth.

This strategy of performing inclusion by emphasizing the IIT’s ability to be an anchor institution is not a secret; indeed, it is one of the reasons for the proliferation of the IITs to newer and less-developed areas. Although I have only studied one IIT in depth, I was able to use documentary sources to identify this strategy in several other IITs located in underdeveloped areas as well. Table 1 lists several IITs located in underdeveloped areas (either in an underdeveloped state or in a rural area) and sources giving claims from politicians, residents, or other organizations that the arrival of the institute has stimulated or will stimulate economic development in the area (although these claims are not always successful, as in the case of IIT Goa). These sources include media reports as well as reports by researchers. (The new IIT I studied in depth may or may not be on this list; in order to preserve confidentiality I simply present here all the instances where it was possible to identify an anchor institution strategy through documentary sources.)

A thorough study of social impacts was conducted before the arrival of an IIT to Palakkad, conducted by social scientists and utilizing surveys and interviews with the families whose lands and livelihood were directly or indirectly affected (Don Bosco Arts and Science College 2018). The study cites positive impacts including promotion of tourism and improvement of infrastructure, increased hospitality

**Table 1:** Anchor institution strategy in IITs in underdeveloped areas

| IIT          | Sources   |
|--------------|---|
| IIT Patna    | <i>Economic Times</i> (2011)  |
| IIT Mandi    | Garg et al. (2013)  |
| IIT Palakkad | Government of Kerala (2018); Ezhuthachan (2020)   |
| IIT Jammu    | <i>Tribune</i> (2015); Bharatiya Janata Party, Jammu and Kashmir (2018)   |
| IIT Goa      | <i>Naohind Times</i> (2018); <i>Mint</i> (2020); <i>New Indian Express</i> (2020); Niazi (2021); Ummid.com (2021) |
| IIT Dharwad  | Hiremath (2019)   |

and small-scale business enterprises, increased employment opportunities, and technological boosts to the area's industrial capacity (Pp. 48–9). According to this study the families whose lands were affected were supportive of the arrival of the IIT but demanded higher compensation because their main source of income, agricultural land, was being taken.

The argument that the IITs benefit their locale has been successful, as can be seen in the fact that many peripheral areas have worked hard to attract an IIT; indeed, this is the main reason for their proliferation. In the 1980s a violent movement against Muslims arose in the northeastern state of Assam. It was resolved through the "Assam Accords," which included as one feature a governmental agreement to open a new IIT campus in Assam. Since then, more and more states have demanded, and received, an IIT for similar reasons. Instead of complaining about the IITs' exclusion, peripheral areas want an IIT for themselves. In addition to the material benefits, there is an intangible but undeniable prestige to states from having an IIT. One professor at the new IIT noted,

in the beginning, when I used to take class in the first semester ... every day media will come. Every day. Maybe two, three, four different TV channels people will come, with all camera and everything ... [this area] has been waiting for an IIT for a long time ... The dream is coming true. IIT is there in [area] (N11; also O04, N15, N17, N18, N19).

The prestige also serves as a warrant for the IITs' privilege. When asked whether it is worth it to spend so much money on the IIT given the poverty of the local context, or whether the money would be better spent on investing in basic education instead, one respondent commented, "If you buy an elephant you have to feed it" (N36).

### *Protecting the Meritocratic Core*

The benefits to the surrounding context are a key element in the functioning of the IITs, allowing them to remain undisturbed even as they draw a disproportionate share of government resources. But, just as the locals are not interested in the organization's meritocratic nature, the issue of benefits for locals is not important in the discourse of faculty or students. For them, the surrounding context is a

peripheral and mainly negative factor, representing danger. Fear of the surrounding context leads to distance from the surrounding context, which has the effect that local nonmeritocratic modes of understanding do not permeate the IIT. While allowing locals inside its walls and contributing to local development, the new IIT seals off its meritocratic core through discursive and symbolic processes as well as channels of recruitment of students and faculty that are rigorously policed.

Consider the policing of the JEE, which is conducted in two stages. The first stage is run by the central government. The second stage, which determines entrance into the IITs, is run by the IITs themselves. The exam and its scoring are stringently protected from corruption, as the IIT faculty and administrators are acutely aware that preserving the exam's reputation is in their material and symbolic interests (O01, O07, O11, N11, N14, N30). Although all of the IIT campuses are involved in administering and overseeing the exam, so far only the older IITs have been entrusted with setting the questions and grading the papers (O07). Once, in 1997, the exam paper was leaked, and all the students taking the exam throughout the entire country were required to take it again, an episode that serves as a cautionary tale. The faculty are aware that their integrity depends on the integrity of the JEE. "If we lose that . . ." said one of our interviewees, his voice trailing off (O01). Even lower-caste and lower-class groups who benefit from quotas study for and enter through the JEE, although with lower cutoff scores. Thus, the process ensures that nepotism and patronage cannot be exercised by any students, from privileged groups or underprivileged groups.

Faculty recruitment is also meritocratic. The government mandates certain minimum criteria, including grades and age limits, and departments and directors are allowed to impose additional criteria beyond these. As there is a flight to objectivity in undergraduate admissions, so there is a flight to objectivity in faculty hiring, with much interest in quantitative metrics such as impact factor and H-index. There has traditionally been no affirmative action in faculty hiring, but some concessions are granted, such as slight relaxations of the age limits for lower castes. For faculty, promotion is not by seniority but by open competition. Faculty come from all over India, although there is a disproportionate number from the state (N05, N11, N20, N30, N39).

There is also a written exam and interview process for upper-level staff (administrators). Precisely because of corruption in higher education, it cannot be taken for granted that credentials translate to skills, and therefore candidates for such positions must show ability in areas that, in countries with less corruption, would be assumed to have been demonstrated through acquisition of a higher degree. Even candidates arriving from other related positions are required to take exams (O8).

The upper-level staff come from the local state and nearby states. They speak in English to students and professors, although they often speak in the local language among themselves. At the new IIT upper-level staff mostly live on campus (N36, N29), although one faculty member noted,

I can say that there is a kind of demarcation between the staff and the faculty. So we have the residential areas are also a little far and kind of WhatsApp group that goes on. [pause] It's like there is no barrier so

as to say you cannot intermingle. There are some staff who organize things. There are faculty members who organize things, and it is open for all. But somehow the families the staff families do not, they're not forthcoming in interacting with faculty families and vice versa (N04).

As discussed above, lower-level staffing is outsourced and is not competitive, and this is what allows the IIT to work with the patrimonialism of the local context. Because of the different recruitment procedures, the lower-level staff come from the village in which the campus is located as well as nearby villages. They do not speak English; they speak in the local language, or dialects, and they live off campus. Personnel procedures that allow patrimonialism of the kind that got Nilima her job can thus coexist easily with the rigorously guarded exams and procedures that recruit students and faculty. Because the recruitment procedures are so different, it is less likely that corruption, nepotism, or patrimonialism at the level of lower-level staff will influence faculty hiring or student admissions. The English language and histories of privilege or underprivilege also serve as barriers. The new IIT's main method of preserving its meritocratic practices is to create completely different worlds with high symbolic barriers between the lower-level staff, who come from the nearby area and may have understandings of corruption and patrimonialism common to that area, and the faculty and students, who arrive from all over India through stringently protected processes.

We can see the procedures through which these worlds are separated in the IIT Palakkad social impact study mentioned above (Don Bosco Arts and Science College 2018). An example of decoupling can be seen in the divergent response to two demands. One villager says, in the study's paraphrase, "As we are losing the entire land, affecting our livelihood, it should be compensated with employment opportunities" (P. 14). This procedure is adopted and becomes an official part of the plan (P. x). On the other hand, another villager says, "Like employment opportunities to the households of the affected families, an option may be set out in relaxing the eligibility criteria in securing admission for the children of the affected families in IIT" (P. 15). This seems a straightforward request—if local villagers can be employees, why not students?—but in the world of the IITs this is unthinkable. The report comments only "This does not come under the purview of SIA [Social Impact Assessment] study" (P. 15), and it is not mentioned again. In the United States it is common for students from the area around a university to receive admissions preference as part of a university's strategy for serving the local context (e.g., Jan 2009), but this is not possible at the IITs because of the central role of the JEE.

Particularly revealing is one element of how certain members of the new IIT are kept at arm's length, what I call the trope of the dangerous construction worker.

The new IIT campus is under construction, and in the hot climate, much of the construction work happens at night. Partly as a result, construction workers do not come into regular contact with the rest of the IIT community. The construction workers come from the local village and nearby; although in other contexts in India women also participate in construction work, at the new IIT as far as I was able to ascertain, the construction workers were predominantly male. Our respondents did not report any trouble or any incidents with construction workers, but many

faculty, staff, and students nevertheless believe that the presence of the construction workers within the walls presents a security situation. The trope of the dangerous construction worker is so pervasive that it leads to different curfews for male and female students because the administration feels it cannot guarantee the safety of young women at night in the presence of the construction workers. Although male students have no curfew, female students “have to come in the hostel by twelve because it’s like the construction is going on and the . . . administration . . . don’t like to take any risks . . . they can trust students, they can trust their guards, but they can’t trust the construction workers” (N23). The curfew, in turn, makes it difficult for female students to determine their own schedules and participate in the culture of late-night studying and extracurricular activities (N01, N05, N15, N23, N27, N33).

The jobs the lower-level staff can find outside the gates are not as well paid as the jobs inside the gates. Given this discrepancy, the lower-level staff have incentives to do everything they can to remain employed at the IIT. For example, one supervisor noted that janitors routinely return very expensive phones that students have left in classrooms (N18). Lower-level staff spoke of fear of losing their jobs and described their efforts to avoid any kind of blame (N29, N37). In the local context, the construction workers are the hard-working sons, brothers, and fathers with good jobs.

The faculty and students’ fear of the dangerous construction worker—so pervasive that it actually *generates gender inequality throughout the organization*—thus seems less a response to actual behavior from construction workers or actual risk from the lower-level staff and more a concretization of the separation of the two incommensurable worlds within the campus walls. This is not to say that the fear is irrational. The university already finds it difficult to recruit female students because of the reputation of the area (e.g., N24), and assault of a student by a construction worker could create a scandal that would threaten the university’s functioning (whereas assault of one student by another might be naturalized if it were even reported). But this is not a function of the likelihood of the event as much as a demonstration of the patterns of difference in this social setting and how they are perceived both inside and outside the institute.

## Other Cases

This section examines other cases of proto-bureaucracies to ask whether we can make a causal claim that meritocratic decoupling leads to the success of a proto-bureaucracy and to identify the scope conditions of the argument. A systematic analysis of proto-bureaucracies is not possible as no definitive list exists, but it is possible to test elements of the claim for organizations identified in the secondary literature. First, I conduct a comparison between organizations in the energy sector in Suriname and Tanzania, of which one is a successful proto-bureaucracy and the others failed proto-bureaucracies. The energy sector is very different from higher education, and Suriname and Tanzania are far from South Asia, suggesting that the framework applies beyond the specific case of the IITs and the specific context of India. Second, I identify other strategies beyond meritocratic decoupling that



proto-bureaucracies use to survive, in order to identify the scope conditions of meritocratic decoupling.

### *Successful versus Failed Proto-Bureaucracy*

Can we argue that meritocratic decoupling is a reason for the success of proto-bureaucracies? Comparing successful and failed bureaucracies in the same sector demonstrates how meritocratic decoupling can protect a proto-bureaucracy. Suriname has managed to create an effective oil extraction company, Staatsolie, whereas Tanzania attempted to create effective oil regulators but was unable to do so. Hout (2017) suggests Staatsolie's success is because oil is marginal to Suriname's economy, unlike other cases such as Nigeria. This marginality allows Staatsolie to remain undisturbed. However, this factor does not clearly distinguish Suriname from Tanzania, where oil may one day become a dominant sector but is still marginal.

An examination of both cases with the meritocratic decoupling framework in mind suggests rather that the key difference was that in the absence of performative inclusion—found in Staatsolie but not in the Tanzanian organizations—it is impossible to protect the meritocratic core.

The story of two regulatory organizations in Tanzania, the Tanzania Petroleum Development Corporation (TPDC) and the Energy and Water Utilities Regulatory Authority (EWURA), seems to fit the argument that proto-bureaucracies exist when and only when political leaders want them. EWURA was established in 2006 and quickly gained a reputation as an effective institution (Pederson et al. 2010). Members of EWURA explicitly gave political protection as the reason for their effectiveness: "We were allowed to become strong because [the president] believed in the powers of the regulators. He said: 'they act as shock absorbers. They do what the government wants to do, but shy away from'" (quoted in Pederson et al. [2010]:1214). EWURA used this political protection to develop performance-based recruitment and retention practices, which was "rather unorthodox from a Tanzanian perspective" (P. 1214). Staff were given training and taught international methods. TPDC, likewise, benefited from political protection and used it to implement a competitive recruitment process and intensive training, including training abroad (P. 1215).

However, political leaders eventually developed designs on the revenues to be gained from extraction and passed legislation to take 92 percent of the profits, much higher than in other sub-Saharan countries; this led to a significant downturn in investment (P. 1216). Further legislation centralized decision-making in the legislature, affecting first TPDC's autonomy and then EWURA's recruitment system—for example, doing away with the system of temporary, performance-related contracts. The suspension of EWURA's director for having required technocratic scrutiny of a powerful, scandal-plagued producer signaled the end of its status as an exceptional organization (P. 1216).

If Tanzania reflects the importance of "political will," the case of Staatsolie in Suriname shows that this explanation is incomplete and helps to show how political will can be generated. Staatsolie was set up in favorable political circumstances, but it was able to survive when the political winds shifted. As in Tanzania, the gov-

ernment wanted more of the oil company's revenues, and in 1998 the Wijdenbosch government decided to gain it by privatizing the Tambaredjo oil field. The head of Staatsolie, Eddy Jharap, resisted and was removed from power. However, a strike of 700 Staatsolie workers, followed by popular revolts, forced the government to reverse course in eight weeks (Leidsch Dagblad 1998b).

Examining more carefully how Staatsolie survived shows the usefulness of the meritocratic decoupling framework. The company protected its meritocratic core by physically and symbolically distancing itself: "Jharap purposefully made Staatsolie into an 'island' during its early years. Its operations, located away from the capital, Paramaribo, were out of sight for most people" (Hout 2007:1343). Jharap also sought sources of capital other than the state (P. 1343). The protection of the military allowed recruitment to proceed on meritocratic rather than patrimonial lines:

Background and ethnicity are considered irrelevant as criteria for appointment and promotion within Staatsolie. In order to upgrade the quality of its staff, Staatsolie has instituted a sizeable training programme, the budget of which is currently in the order of \$0.5–\$1 million annually, as well as a management development programme (Pp. 1343–44).

Staatsolie's performative inclusion was both symbolic and material. A central element in its self-presentation, from its origins, has been the argument that it benefits all Surinamese for nationalistic reasons because Suriname should be proud to have a meritocratic, capable organization. In a memoir, Jharap (2010) explicitly identifies the development of Staatsolie as part of a postcolonial attempt at rebuilding the country: "Fifty years ago, as I grew up in Suriname and attended high school, almost all high level positions in the private sector as well as in the government service were occupied by foreigners. There were hardly any role-models that looked like us" (P. 6). As a student in the Netherlands in the 1960s, he found that the Dutch would say,

"Why do you want independence? For every task of any importance you need us to do the job there. You can't even do anything at all by yourselves". I was flabbergasted, and these denigrating remarks were not acceptable. Then I made up my mind. There was no use for talks anymore. I would show them to be wrong. I would complete my study as fast as possible and go back to Suriname, to accomplish something special and challenging to show the world that, we people from developing countries, are not less than people from the First World. My dream got a clear shape (Pp. 6–7).

Jharap goes on to explain the founding of Staatsolie and the many problems it faced, including technical issues, falling oil prices, and political and economic unrest in the country:

We survived and the slogan: "Confidence in our Own Abilities" was launched and painted on the beams of all pump jacks ... At the start of

Staatsolie, its small crew functioned like a movement . . . We would have weekly meetings of the total staff, every body from cleaning woman to the managing director. At these meetings we spoke about the substance of Staatsolie, the meaning of “Confidence in our Own Abilities”, and in particular the immaterial objectives were emphasized. It was like a family meeting at the din[n]er table. In retrospect, it was more like the political movement I came from (Pp. 20–21).

Observers may take from the story of Staatsolie the importance of a dedicated leader like Jharap, but equally important is what that leader does. In this case, the meritocratic organization’s strategy for arguing that it benefits the nonmeritocratic context is nationalist. The defense against the government’s attack in 1998 was conducted not in terms of productivity, efficiency, or merit but of nationalism: during the attempted political attack Jharap complained that the government was trying to sell national resources (Leidsch Dagblad 1998a). Observers believed this self-presentation was a key element in the organization’s ability to survive, because “Staatsolie is the pride of every Surinamese” (Leidsch Dagblad 1998a).

As a large organization, Staatsolie also directly benefited many workers. It is notable that the popular protests were begun by the labor union of Staatsolie, those who directly benefited from its presence. Although the secondary literature does not provide the kind of detailed organizational ethnography that would show how recruitment of the “cleaning woman” versus recruitment of the “managing director” worked, nor the practices that policed the different recruitment policies, we can see that in both symbolic terms and material terms, Staatsolie was able to argue that it benefited those who were excluded by its meritocratic criteria of performance-based rewards.

In Tanzania, on the other hand, rather than nationalism becoming discursively linked to the companies’ performance as meritocracies, a “resource nationalism” emerged in which the president attempted “to use extractive resources to consolidate his power in anticipation of future rents in an environment of increasingly competitive elections” (Jacob and Pedersen 2018:290–291). As regulators rather than producers, EWURA and TPDC were smaller organizations than Staatsolie, which meant they did not directly benefit as many workers. Thus, in Tanzania, inability to perform inclusion left the organization vulnerable to the vagaries of political will.

### *Other Strategies*

This article asks how proto-bureaucracies manage the resentments of excluded populations. Examining other proto-bureaucracies shows that meritocratic decoupling is found in other cases, but it is only one of three ways of managing the resentments of excluded populations.

Meritocratic decoupling is seen in Brazil’s national development bank, which performed inclusion by changing its name from the Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico (National Bank for Economic Development) to Banco Nacional de Desenvolvimento Econômico e Social (National Bank for Economic and Social Development). It protects its meritocratic core through strategies similar to the IIT, most importantly exams for the technical staff (Willis 1995:640). Decoupling

between the signal of inclusion and the meritocratic core is visible in that although the bank did pay some attention to equalizing regional geographic differences between 1970 and 1985, after that time period it returned to favoring areas that were already well developed because these areas were the ones that generated projects able to pass the meritocratic selection criteria (Hanley et al. 2016:838). A more substantive performance of inclusion can be seen in the South African Revenue Service's reorganization in 1999 and 2000, which required all managers to be subjected to new meritocratic tests but retained those who did not perform well in other, nonmanagerial positions (Hausman 2013).

Beyond meritocratic decoupling, a second way that some organizations manage the challenge of excluded populations is by emphasizing that their task directly benefits the populations that their meritocracy excludes. Roll (2014) notes that some proto-bureaucracies have the task to deliver "goods and services to a large share of the population that has previously been neglected" (P. 235). One example of this is a rural preventive health program in Ceará, one of the poorest states in Brazil, in an area known for clientelism, corruption, and poor bureaucratic quality (Tendler and Freedheim 1994; Tendler 1997). Although the staff of the organization were chosen meritocratically, the tasks those staff conducted directly benefited the excluded populations. Infant deaths declined 36 percent in five years after the introduction of the program. Even here, interestingly, we see an element of performative inclusion. Exclusive hiring based on a competitive process was necessary to the program's effectiveness and produced the same elements of status and distinction seen in other such bureaucracies. Tendler and Freedheim (1994) argue that the exclusion of rejected applicants was handled very carefully:

the traveling committee had a special message at these meetings for the applicants who would not be chosen. "Those of you who are not selected," they said, "must make sure that those who are chosen abide by the rules" ... these promises turned a group of dozens of rejected applicants into informed public monitors of a new program in which the potential for abuse was high.

They argue that this did help prevent abuse in the program and also made the candidates who were not hired feel involved with the program (Pp. 1777–78). However, because the program directly benefits the population, it may not be as necessary to protect the meritocratic core through strategies of distancing, and we do not see either the symbolic distancing between workers seen in the IITs or the physical distancing of Staatsolie. Similarly, Nigeria's National Administration for Food and Drug Administration and Control (NAFDAC) directly benefits excluded populations by protecting them from tainted food and drugs, and maintaining political will was therefore largely a matter of publicly communicating its role and achievements (Pogson and Roll 2014).

Finally, a third way to manage the resentments of the excluded population is through authoritarianism and policies to prevent grievances from coalescing. This is seen in the proto-bureaucracies of the Gulf states. Hertog (2010) studies 11 resource-dependent countries and finds effective state-owned enterprises are more likely where politics are "quietist, conservative on matters of class structure,

and openly probusiness. . . . Gulf rulers have tried to prevent the formation and organization of domestic lower classes, not least through their policy of large-scale labor imports. Unions have been prohibited in most Gulf states for most of their history" (P. 281). The only Gulf state unable to create an effective state-owned enterprise is Kuwait, the only Gulf state with a successful democratic tradition, which Hertog blames for "a fiscally reckless character" (P. 287).

Thus, meritocratic decoupling is one of three ways by which we can see proto-bureaucracies managing the challenges of the excluded population. However, it may be the strategy most open to the majority of organizations in democratic contexts because most organizations cannot claim to directly benefit the excluded, and even some that do will do so only in the long run, not in ways that are immediately visible. For example, a statistical agency might not have transformative effects, and its goal is not specifically to benefit the poor; universities that resist patronage hires are more likely to benefit the middle and upper classes who attend them, even if they don't possess the IITs' disproportionate resources; and retail organizations that resist corruption cannot claim that their main goal is to benefit non-elites. But all of these organizations are necessary for the economic and social development of a society. For these organizations, meritocratic decoupling of the kind examined here may be the only way to become a proto-bureaucracy.

## Discussion and Policy Implications

In the global development field there has been growing policy and intellectual interest over the last several decades in governance reform and effective institutions. The United Nations concretized attention to institutions in one of its Sustainable Development Goals, the World Bank has published an annual development report on "governance," and scholars at Princeton University have devoted effort to cataloguing successful institutions around the world (World Bank 2017; Hickey 2019; <https://successfulsocieties.princeton.edu/>).

The literature on bureaucracies in contexts where bureaucracy is rare is a promising starting point for a discussion of how to create effective institutions. However, this literature has not yet engaged explicitly with the environment in which these institutions find themselves, nor asked why actors may have reasons to be suspicious of effective institutions. Thus, scholars fall back on political will as the reason for proto-bureaucracies.

In this article I have suggested one main reason proto-bureaucracies are difficult to create is that they generate exclusion, and a proto-bureaucracy can produce and sustain political will by arguing that it benefits those whom it excludes. Its meritocratic procedures require exclusion, but there are several ways to argue that it nevertheless benefits the surrounding context. To perform this dual task, engaging the context while excluding it, the bureaucracy decouples some of its units from each other, keeping them at a distance symbolically. Through such practices, the new IIT sustains the exclusion that is necessary for its survival but also defuses opposition to that exclusion by working with the patrimonial recruitment practices of the local context.

When brought to scrutiny, meritocratic decoupling seems obvious: obviously if an organization in a patrimonial context wants to be rational and effective it must protect its meritocratic core, and it must somehow appeal to the surrounding context. But proto-bureaucracies are rare, suggesting that it is not easy to perform this dual task. My goal in this article has been to distill the lessons of proto-bureaucracies so that other organizations may be able to learn and apply them (Prasad 2021:91).

Echoes of the functions I have described can be found in developed countries as well. Theorists of “representative bureaucracy” have noted that bureaucracies are exclusionary everywhere (Kennedy 2014). All large organizations will have different modes of recruitment of personnel at different levels, and many organizations in developed countries also perform inclusion through practices such as corporate social governance and greenwashing.

Nevertheless, the difference is that in developing countries proto-bureaucracies are unusual and draw disproportionate resources. This means those who are excluded from a proto-bureaucracy are less likely to have the option of finding employment in another similar organization, as they would in a developed country, and the process of selection therefore has higher stakes. Because they are located in a patrimonial context, proto-bureaucracies also violate widespread norms that bureaucrats will favor kin and supporters. Thus, those excluded from proto-bureaucracies will be many in number, will not have other similar employment chances, and can draw on widespread repertoires to discredit the proto-bureaucracy. This is why “political will” can be hard to generate or maintain. For all these reasons, meritocratic decoupling is a matter of survival for proto-bureaucracies. As in Tanzania, proto-bureaucracies that cannot perform inclusion and protect their meritocratic core find themselves unable to sustain political support while remaining meritocracies.

These observations may help to explain the hyper-rigid admissions and examination procedures of the new IIT, as well as the extreme symbolic distancing between the populations within the walls. We can see the effort and energy required to create boundaries between the proto-bureaucracy and the patrimonial context—especially because that context cannot be excluded wholesale but must be invited into the organization selectively in order to defend the organization as benefiting the locale.

These insights allow the development of a research agenda and a policy agenda. The research agenda is to answer questions such as, How exactly do these practices emerge within some organizations, and why do they not always emerge? What are the various forms of performative inclusion? I have discussed material inclusion of local workers and discursive inclusion in nationalist projects, but I have not provided a systematic framework for performative inclusion, discussed when and why some performances are more genuine than others, or explored when attempts at performative inclusion are successful and when they fail. And what are the various strategies for protecting the meritocratic core, beyond policing recruitment and creating distance between workers? These questions suggest that the research on proto-bureaucracies could benefit from a more systematic ethnographic, historical, and comparative turn. In addition, the scholarship could benefit from more sustained analysis of failed proto-bureaucracies to understand why meritocratic decoupling may be difficult.

The policy agenda is to develop meritocratic decoupling as a strategy for strengthening governance in developing countries. This argument suggests that resource-rich organizations in rural or underdeveloped areas, such as universities, hospitals, airports, and public utilities, could form the backbone for an incremental process of governance reform because the benefits they bring to the local area can defuse opposition to their meritocratic practices. In many rural contexts in the developing world, even an agency such as a court could be rich enough compared with the surrounding context to serve as an anchor institution. And even if some organizations can never become anchor institutions, the creation of enough corruption-free organizations could seed the society with models of culture and practice that may diffuse through normative or mimetic means (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) or in times of crisis.

I do not argue that this strategy is without problems. First, it remains to be answered whether the work of the IITs, and the extremely disproportionate resources that flow to them, are overall a benefit to the taxpayers who fund them. Well-functioning universities are surely necessary for the development of a society, but it is not clear that this extreme inequality of resources is beneficial for India. On the other hand, it is also possible that a broader distribution of resources would be wasted through corruption. Whether a particular proto-bureaucracy is beneficial is a separate question, however, from the question examined here of how proto-bureaucracies defend themselves. Second, this study shows that the practice of meritocratic decoupling creates a hierarchy in which local workers are symbolically excluded and reproduces rather than dismantles lines of privilege within the organization's walls. A critic could argue that what is being advocated is co-optation of the non-elite, placating them with some trickle-down of resources or even just rhetoric. For these reasons, the kind of incremental reform of institutions examined here does not constitute fundamental social or political change.

Nevertheless, it is also clear at this point that *fundamental social and political change require effective institutions*. Projects of land reform cannot be carried out if the agencies in charge of them are continually demanding bribes for the performance of routine tasks. Large welfare projects will lose political and popular support if their benefits are mostly going to the kinfolk and the networks of the bureaucrats who oversee them. Revenues for the kinds of programs that many activists promote cannot be collected if taxpayers have reason to think tax money is wasted through nepotism and patronage. Indeed, if law enforcement can be corrupted, then those activists will be in jail. Governance reform does not constitute fundamental social and political change by itself, but it is a prerequisite for fundamental social and political change.

For example, in an article on the beneficial functions of corruption, Marquette and Peiffer (2018) write, "reformers should focus on the root causes of corruption—for example, poverty, weak political institutions, weak leadership—before attempting to tackle corruption directly" (P. 509). What they do not tell us is how we can fight poverty, build institutions, or strengthen leadership without agencies free of corruption. An attempt to fight poverty by implementing welfare benefits is doomed to fail if tax and social service agencies recruit and promote workers based on nepotism and patronage rather than performance, and it is hard to see how

institutions can be strengthened without fighting corruption, or how strong but corrupt leaders would constitute progress.

The organizations credited with catalyzing fundamental social and political change in East Asia, for example, have been highly privileged meritocracies, such as Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry. The exclusionary nature of the Japanese bureaucracy is ensured through marriage ties, geographic ties, and especially university networks, with the upper echelons of the bureaucracies coming overwhelmingly from Tokyo University and specifically from the Tokyo University Law School (Johnson 1982:57–9). But this hyper-exclusionary organization launched a transformation of the economy that benefited all Japanese citizens. The technocratic and exclusive nature of its personnel—built on competitive recruitment exams and network ties—mattered less than, and may have actually contributed to, the efficient accomplishment of the task, which was of tremendous and widespread social benefit. Not all proto-bureaucracies accomplish beneficial tasks (Soares de Oliveira 2007), but some can be foundational to social transformation (Phillips 2016).

For these reasons, the international development community has recognized that governance reform is necessary. But twenty years of anti-corruption reform efforts have not shown much success (Gans-Morse et al. 2018). The individual-level solutions that form the bulk of the approaches taken by international anti-corruption reformers ignore some elementary sociological and anthropological facts and, perhaps as a consequence, have not been able to justify the immense effort and resources that have been expended on them (Prasad et al. 2019). In this context learning lessons from proto-bureaucracies is an appealing option. The main lesson of proto-bureaucracies is that effective institutions generate exclusion, but meritocratic practices can be sustained if the exclusions they generate can be addressed in other ways.

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