



Bureaucracy

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Bureaucracy quite literally translates into rule by public office ('bureau'). The anthropology of bureaucracy can be seen as falling under two broad approaches. Firstly, there is an expanding corpus of work that concentrates its attention on explaining how different bureaucracies – from different arms of the state to NGOs to supranational organizations – actually function; what their 'inner worlds' are like; and why and how they produce the results they do. The second approach can be described as one that looks at how bureaucracies monitor or audit themselves as well as how they are pushing for self-reform. From a time when bureaucracies were almost entirely neglected by anthropologists due to a (mis)perception of them as disenchanted Weberian iron cages of modernity, there is now a far keener awareness of the operations of bureaucratic structures and demands. Nowhere is this more evident than in the critical awareness of bureaucratic demands and constrictions within Euro-American Universities.

Introduction

The English word bureaucracy is borrowed from the French *bureaucratie*, which itself was formed by combining *bureau* ('desk') and *-cratie* (a suffix denoting a kind of government). Literally, it translates into a form of government that is predicated upon a desk – more precisely, an office. It is believed to be coined by the French economist Jean Claude Marie Vincent de Gournay (1712-1759) and moved into the English as 'bureaucracy' in the early 19th century (Harper 2017). As the entry on bureaucracy in the Merriam-Webster dictionary notes, the word has, right from its very start in the early nineteenth century, carried with it pejorative connotations. An 1815 *London Times* article, for example, declares: '... it is in this bureaucracy, Gentlemen, that you will find the invisible and mischievous power which thwarts the most noble views, and prevents or weakens the effect of all the salutary reforms which France is incessantly calling for.' The capacity of bureaucracy to thwart noble or creative views is only further solidified by the utilization of its verb form – bureaucratization – in pathological terms.

Popular readings of Max Weber (1922) are partly to blame for this powerful imaginary of bureaucracy as something that quells creativity, reform, vitality and is only about dull things such as files and rules. In *Economy and society*, he outlines the main characteristics of bureaucracy, a form of officialdom that reaches its purest form only with modernity: it is ordered by a stable set of rules; operates through a form of graded authority or hierarchy; and the management of the modern office requires expertise, official competence, rule-boundedness, and is based upon files. Bureaucracy features centrally in his

‘rationalisation thesis’, described as ‘a grand meta-historical analysis of the dominance of the west in modern times’ (Kim 2012). In one reading of Weber, the world was increasingly disenchanted due to the rationalization of all spheres of life – partly due to increasing bureaucratization – and the world was being propelled towards a rigid ‘iron-cage’ of modernity (1930). While closer readings of Weber throw up a more complex dialectic of disenchantment and re-enchantment, his discussion of modern bureaucratic petrification lingers on.

Governance

A primary contribution that the anthropological study of bureaucracy has made is to illuminate how varied institutions of governance *actually* work; how and why they produce the sorts of results they do; and what their cultures of [work](#) are. The state and its several wings – ranging from courts of law to village councils – have received particular attention in this regard. There has also been a focus on non-state organizations of welfare and [humanitarianism](#), from small NGOs to large supranational organizations like the United Nations.

Most commonly bureaucracy has been studied through a focus on:

1. The everyday and/or extraordinary events
2. Materiality and affect

These approaches to the study of bureaucracy are neither exhaustive nor are they mutually exclusive. Rather, they are a tool to aid us in thinking through how a notoriously difficult-to-anthropologise subject such as bureaucracy has been tackled.

Arguably the anthropology of the state has produced the largest corpus of writing on bureaucracies. Historical work on colonial state formations had already discussed the significance of rules, documents, surveys, and other knowledge-making practices that allowed imperial state formations to know and, thus, govern their colonies (e.g. Cohn 1996). Work on Empire had pointed out the significance of the work of bureaucracy in making and maintaining states, for instance, with Ann Stoler describing the colonial archives and the documents housed within them to be ‘technologies that reproduce’ states (2009: 28). Weber (1922), probably before anyone else, had identified the locus of power in the modern state to reside within the bureau, which in turn was dependent upon files and the management of documents: artifacts that continue to attract a lot of attention.

Placing an emphasis on everyday life allows one to look beyond what are often perfunctorily dismissed as mere routine, mundane, and repetitive practices, more commonly lumped under the disparaging adjective ‘bureaucratic’. Bernstein and Mertz, for instance, make a case for looking at ‘everyday maintenance’ of the state through an investigation of ‘the main occupations of contemporary states: administration, regulation,

deregulation' (2011: 6; also see Gupta 1995).

Different monographs and articles have studied the everyday state with different objectives. For instance, Emma Tarlo studied bureaucracy in India to understand the manner in which the state controlled and managed to repress the memory of one very particular period of Indian [history](#). She is interested in the memory of the gross violation of fundamental rights that occurred during nineteen months (June 1975 to January 1977) of 'Emergency' rule when normal [democratic](#) operations had been suspended. Veena Das (2005) has studied the Indian state during what appear to be moments of extraordinariness (such as the Emergency or periods of communal violence in India) to powerfully argue that these extraordinary events are *not* separated out from everyday life.

If Das demonstrates that extraordinary and the everyday are not distinct, other [ethnographies](#) have taken the quotidian itself as the object of inquiry. In one iteration of this focus on the quotidian life of bureaucracies, they can assist in making sense of long-term historical trends. For instance, Ilana Feldman directs her gaze onto the everyday writing practices of bureaucracies in Gaza over the period of 1917-1967. Feldman claims that to really comprehend what is seen as the defining date in Palestinian history - the *nakba* (catastrophe) of 1948 - we need to calibrate how this event was managed subsequently, '...whether it be the transformation of an ethics of care, the reconfiguration of service bureaucracies, or the development of new forms of documentation' (2008: 2). Similarly, Chatterji and Mehta (2007) make a case for studying Hindu-Muslim violence in a slum in Mumbai not merely by focusing on the riot or believing that the 'normal' life resumes uncomplicatedly once violence ends. They focus, instead, on how the resumption of 'normalcy' is crafted through everyday practices such as the setting up of government commissions to investigate the riots, the documentation of the riots in official narratives, the remaking of the space of the slum, the initiation of slum redevelopment programs, and the governmental [technologies](#) of rule enacted through extra-governmental bodies such as NGOs.

As even a cursory visit to state bureaucracies in much of the world will immediately make evident, a profound reliance on paper/documents/files is the constitutive feature of bureaucracy. Ethnographies of institutions and organizations (Harper 1997, Riles 2001), states (Stoler 2009, Feldman 2008, Messick 1996), 'wannabe'-states (Navaro-Yashin 2012), and the increasingly globalised auditing regimes (Hetherington 2011) demonstrate the ubiquity of documentary practices and the manner in which paper underpins action and constitutes legitimised evidence. Matthew Hull (2012) has extended the focus on documents by studying urban governance in Pakistan as a material practice. Within the Pakistani bureaucracy is a great variety of what he terms graphic artefacts: files, office registers, minutes, organizational charts, plans, visiting cards, "chits," petitions, powers of attorney, memos, letters, revenue records, regulations, reports, policy statements, and office manuals. Through an innovative study of these graphic artefacts and the workings of the urban development authority in Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan, Hull demonstrates the forms taken on by the planned, modernist city of Islamabad. His work is

able to answer concrete questions on the development of Islamabad as a particular type of city as well as the effects of urban planning and relocation for the city residents.

Another recent monograph (Mathur 2016) based in neighbouring India, also centres bureaucratic things and practices as it seeks to answer questions that are often posed for the developmental Indian state: Why is the Indian state incapable of producing desired change despite its beautiful and complex plans/policies/laws; why and how do well-meaning laws produce absurdity or fail in their entirety? Mathur's ethnography focuses on quotidian bureaucratic practices – reading, writing, lettering, filing, producing and circulating documents, and meetings – and the daily expending of bureaucratic [labour](#) on these banal practices through which an anti-poverty statute was executed. Her ethnography demonstrates that the welfare legislation came to a grinding halt not because of corruption, dysfunctionality, inefficiency or low capacity of the Indian state, but rather due to its historically sedimented material and affective bureaucratic practices.

Marthur's ethnography shows state functioning does not occur mechanically despite that oft-repeated metaphor of the machine of the state, which, with all its connotations of a unitary system working on automaton, is highly misleading. The metaphor of the machine is often applied to the study of development bureaucracies: De Vries described it as 'a crazy, expansive machine, driven by its capacity to incorporate, refigure and reinvent all sorts of desires for development' (2007: 37); Nuijten (2004: 211) terms the Mexican bureaucracy a 'hope-generating machine' emphasising its capacity to generate hope over its depoliticization effect as famously explored by Ferguson (1990), probably the most famous descriptor of the development apparatus as a machine that produces an anti-politics. Emergent ethnographies of bureaucracies have done much to move away from such machine metaphors to show their contextualised and specific effects. Some of this new ethnographic work on bureaucracy focuses on materiality that goes beyond paper/documents to include, for instance, roads (Harvey and Knox 2015), genealogical charts (Chelcea 2016), and law (Latour 2009). Furthermore, as state bureaucracies the world over have begun experimenting with new technologies and are shifting from what media historian Lisa Gitelman (2014) describes as 'paper knowledge' to forms of e-governance, a host of new ethnographies are emerging that depict these new bureaucratic worlds (e.g. Rao & Greenleaf 2013, Breckenridge 2014)

In tandem with the focus on the material culture of bureaucracies, the turn towards studying the role of [affect](#) and emotions in political and social life has, also, assisted with a movement away from studying policies or bureaucracies as 'legal-rational ways of getting things done' (Wedel *et al.* 2005: 30) to instead bring out their affective dimensions and socialities (e.g. Bear 2005, Laszczkowski & Reeves 2015). Navaro-Yashin (2012) centres affect in the study of modern bureaucracy. She studies Turkish-Cypriots as they relate to and transact documents produced by several different administrative structures and practices. The Turkish-Cypriots she discusses are subjects and 'citizens', since 1983, of an unrecognised state, the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' (TRNC), which is considered illegal under international law. In

describing how they interact with and respond to state documents, she shows how these material objects of law and governance have an affective underside: they induce ‘panic and fear, wit and irony, cynicism and familiarity’ (2012: 125).

The anthropology of bureaucracy has not just shed light on the operation of states but also, more recently, of global organizations (Sapignoli & Niezen 2017). Ranging from understanding the politics of monitoring at the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) (Cowan & Billaud 2015) to how Atlantic bluefin tuna are regulated by a supranational body such as the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) (Telesca 2015), these emergent ethnographies are opening up new spaces for understanding the effects and functioning of transnational bureaucracies. The anthropology of policy and development is, similarly, beginning to foreground the everyday worlds and labours of development and [humanitarian](#) practitioners (e.g. Redfield 2013). This focus on organizational structures and lifeworlds of development bureaucrats in ‘Aidland’ has emerged, Mosse (2013) has cogently argued, due to a dawning recognition that anthropologists need to move away from a mere critical deconstruction of development discourse to a deeper ethnographic exploration of the black box of international development.

Audit and reform

The second broad approach to the anthropology of bureaucracy concentrates its attention not on how bureaucracies function, but rather on how they are monitored, audited, and attempt to transform themselves. One of the earliest collections, *Audit cultures*, published in 2000 and edited by Marilyn Strathern, focused on the relationship between bureaucracies and [neoliberalism](#), was centred upon practices of auditing and seeking accountability. Strathern wrote,

procedures for assessment have social consequences, locking up time, personnel and resources, as well as locking into the moralities of public management. Yet by themselves audit practices often seem mundane, inevitable parts of a bureaucratic process. It is when one starts putting together a larger picture that they take on the contours of a distinct cultural artifact (2000: 2).

This work, along with the many that followed in its wake (e.g. E. Hull 2012), demonstrates the potency of apparently benign injunctions to ‘reform’ institutions and states on unobjectionable principles – such as making them more accountable to ‘the people’.

Following this line of inquiry, a recent collection of essays has foregrounded the changing form of the public good in its [ethnographic](#) study of bureaucracies (Bear & Mathur 2015). A unique characteristic of bureaucracies, after all, is that they exist for the public good. They materialise the redistributive social contract between citizens and the state. A study of public goods acquires particular salience in the contemporary neoliberal period given how they are being pressed into the service of differing organizations the world over. New public goods can be captured in the increasingly strident calls from bureaucrats and

citizens for transparency, accountability, fiscal responsibility, austerity, and decentralization. One way to understand bureaucracies, then, is to focus on the discourse and processes of reform and reorganization that is being undertaken in the name of the public good. Ethnographies of transparency reforms in bureaucracies have, for instance, gone far beyond asking how the opaque is made visible to discuss questions of [surveillance](#), effectiveness, knowledge-creation, and even questioning the very desirability of transparency-projects (Ballesterio 2012).

It is not just global markets or the everyday worlds of traders and investors that an anthropological approach to bureaucracy can illuminate. In recent years, the neoliberal assault on higher education has produced some interesting studies of the university as a bureaucratic organization situated within and affected by global and national policies. Stefan Collini (2012), for instance, has set forth a particularly compelling critique of the neoliberalising moves of privatising education and the conversion of students into 'customers' in the UK. While Collini's writings relate more broadly to the humanities and to the university as a particular form of a public good that should be cherished and preserved, some important work in anthropology had signalled the dangers of 'audit cultures' earlier on. The 2000 collection on audit cultures edited by Strathern as well as *The Audit Society* (Power 1999) had pointed out that [technologies](#) of audit and accountability-generation are not benign practices but tools of neoliberal governmentality, the effects of which are nothing less than coercive for all academics (Shore & Wright 2000, see also Amit 2000 and Fillitz 2000).

Cris Shore & Susan Wright (2000) discussed the rapid and relentless spread of coercive technologies of accountability into higher education in Britain. As they note, audit technologies are not simply innocuously neutral, legal-rational practices: rather, they are instruments for new forms of governance and power. Audit, these anthropologists have argued, must be understood not simply in terms of whether it meets its professed aims and objectives, but in terms of its political functions as a technology of neoliberal governance. A more recent volume of essays pushes this argument further afield to Asia Pacific and Europe to ask if we are now witnessing the death of the public university (Shore & Wright 2017). It focuses on the series of reforms that have been forced upon Universities since the 1980s with particular attention paid to the more recent scramble for higher rankings and utilization of [metrics](#) that can measure 'excellence' and 'innovation' in higher education.

In a powerful 2004 address to the American Anthropological Association, Don Brenneis had made the call for anthropologists to study their own bureaucratic institutions *as anthropologists* and to stop bracketing out important practices, such as the manner in which donor organizations make funding decisions. As he succinctly put it, 'before one can... "write culture" one must write money for an audience of one's peers' (2004: 582). His ethnography of the National Science Foundation (NSF) brings to light a number of important findings, key among them the notion of 'panel civility' that disallows panellists from making what could be seen as 'controversial decisions' and instead rewards conservative proposals, thus limiting the

possibilities of greater anthropological creativity. The call was renewed by the 2017 American Ethnological Society presidential address that, too, laments the absence of enough critical ethnographic ‘homework’ into their own bureaucratic university settings by anthropologists (Gusterson 2017).

In a further turning of a critical anthropological lens onto anthropology departments in Euro-America, the development and strengthening of a flagrantly exploited underclass of academics has been variously described as ‘academic apartheid’ (Unger 1995: 117), ‘the new internal colonialism’ (Giacomo 2010), and ‘a prestige economy’ (Kendzor 2015). These writers, amongst others, have pointed out how higher education is becoming a smaller, more elite club with anthropology departments cutting permanent posts and relying increasingly on and exploiting the labour of never-to-be-tenured adjunct staff. The political-economic changes that have allowed for this state of things are now well documented (see Kendzor 2015). The irony of anthropology as a discipline that prides itself on uncovering structural inequalities in ‘other’ places (the ‘field’) and yet being complicit in perpetuating increasingly exploitative conditions, especially for the younger generation of anthropologists, has not escaped attention. These studies, once again, demonstrate the political possibilities inherent in a deeper analysis of the working of bureaucracies; in this case those very bureaucracies that academics are immersed in.

Banality and boredom

Beyond Weberian (mis)readings, bureaucracy posed a series of more profound problems to anthropology as a discipline with ethnography as its primary method. In the first place, anthropology has been known to be pre-occupied with the remote, exotic, and the Other. Bureaucracy not only is none of these, but it is also something that anthropologists as [professional](#) academics are themselves deeply steeped in. Riles (2001) has described as the ‘achingly familiar’ practices of bureaucratic institutions the world over. She notes that when she was writing up her doctoral research she was struck by the similarities between her own practices as an academic and those of the bureaucracies she studied in Fiji. She argued that these similarities directed our attention to a problem of anthropological analysis that does not inhere in our encounter with knowledge practices ‘outside’ our own, but rather is endemic to the ‘inside’ of modern institutional and academic analysis – the production of funding proposals, the collection of data, the drafting of documents, or the attendance of meetings. Given their own immersion in bureaucratic worlds, anthropologists have up until quite recently tended to not consider it ‘Other-enough’ to warrant serious attention.

Secondly, bureaucracy is often dismissed as too boring to be of any value. David Graeber (2006), for instance, has explored the question of why anthropologists study rituals surrounding births, [deaths](#), marriages, and other rites of passages but not the daily rituals of bureaucratic practices. Neglecting these rituals is particularly puzzling, in Graeber’s perspective, given the anthropologists’ traditional concern with socially efficacious ritual gestures ‘where the mere act of saying or doing something makes it socially true.

Yet in most existing societies at this point, it is precisely paperwork, not other forms of ritual, that is socially efficacious' (2006: 3). Graeber provides an 'obvious answer' to this question: 'The obvious answer is that paperwork is boring. There aren't many interesting things one can say about it'. The clinching argument for the boredom of paperwork and associated bureaucracies is that, with the notable exception of Kafka, they remain largely absent from 'great literature', for 'there's so little there that once you've done it, there's nothing left for anyone to add' (Graeber 2006: 3).^u

Perhaps it is not boredom or an absence of things to say, as much as the difficulty in the crafting of a language to capture the banality and to express the everyday operations of bureaucracies. Indeed, such representational acts seem to be possible in their putatively fictionalised form. Thus, Kafka's writings gave birth to an adjective - Kafkaesque - on the basis of his singular capacity to turn 'bureaucracy into a political grotesque - a grotesquerie that is abysmally comic' (Corngold 2009: 8). Orwell, another superb observer of bureaucracies, invented a whole new vocabulary to describe its characteristics: newspeak, think police, thoughtcrime, etc. What is required then is the crafting of a new language, one that can ethnographically capture the banality of bureaucracy (Mathur 2016). As this entry has argued, the benefits of such a new ethnographic language and practice are potentially enormous: ranging from understanding the functioning of [postcolonial](#) welfare states to a new perspective on contemporary global public goods of transparency and accountability to the very meaning of a university in Britain or the United States.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the anthropology of bureaucracy is capable of shedding new light on urgent matters of global concern - including migration, governance, poverty, austerity, [precarity](#) - and serves as a powerful example of the distinctive power of [ethnography](#) to explain the world in new ways. It also pushes anthropologists to refine their craft and devise new ways to make even the most ordinary social world accessible to its readers. Taken to its fullest potential, the anthropological study of bureaucracy doesn't just help us make sense of the Other - the founding object of study of the discipline. Rather, it helps us make sense of those things, like universities and academic [professionalism](#), which are all too familiar.

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[1] Previously Lévi-Strauss had altogether cut out 'that-which-is-written' from the study of anthropology. He considered the primary function of writing to be the facilitation of 'the enslavement of other human beings', and had asserted half a century back that 'Ethnology is especially interested in what is not written. [It deals with what is] different from everything that men usually dream of engraving in stone or committing to paper' (quoted in Stoler 2009).