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Desiring Bureaucracy

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Abstract

This review presents new perspectives on the anthropology of bureaucracy. Since Weber's account of the importance of this organizational mode to the functioning of contemporary socioeconomic systems, the inescapability of bureaucracy has been repeatedly theorized to show its good and ill effects. Yet anthropologists retain an ambivalent relation to this topic and can struggle to move beyond critique. I consider this ambivalence, suggesting that it reflects a frustrated desire for better governance, and offer neglected topics as potentially productive ways to tackle bureaucracy as an omnipresent yet difficult-to-pinpoint cultural form. Finally, the review makes the case for an impenitently anthropological approach to the fullness of bureaucracy, including testing the ethnographer's founding categories of thought, over a position of pure denunciation or evaluation.

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INTRODUCTION

As both concept and worldly phenomena, bureaucracy cannot be pinned. This review neither attempts such a yoking, nor pretends a synoptic overview of the abundant literature. Instead, it starts by exploring the analytic oppositions generated by bureaucracy's profligacy, conceived as both torture and dream. It then angles for fresh ways to approach bureaucracy *qua* bureaucracy, figured here under "carpets and ghosts" and "desires and laments." A central contribution that anthropologies of bureaucracy might make, I argue, is to be more acutely anthropological, whether that stems from seeing bureaucracies as physical settings and bureaucrats as fleshly beings, thinking about the paranormal and the libidinal, or analyzing bureaucracy's love–hate affect. Considering the role of desire in stoking tacit or explicit hopes for better bureaucracy should also occasion self-review: What are the psychological longings within anthropological accounts of bureaucracy? Such a reckoning is essential if anthropological analyses are to move beyond a position of fictive purity or overconcession to our shared identities as proto-bureaucrats.

A PROMISCUOUS CONCEPT

"Bureaucracy" is agile in both application and signification, able to denote epochal change over time and maddening paperwork in the here and now, oscillating between noun and adjective, curse and prayer. The resilience of the term since its invention during the French Revolution (Kafka 2007) attests to its potency. It describes everything from corrupt officialdom (Gupta 1995) to overwhelming inventory cultures (Power 1997, Strathern 2000, Kipnis 2008). Even that most exacting scholar of bureaucracy, Max Weber, widened the term's potential applications. Bureaucracy, Weber noted, "is fully developed in political and ecclesiastical communities only in the modern state, and in the private economy only in the most advanced institutions of capitalism" (Kalberg 2005, p. 194). The clause "only" scarcely restricts its ambit, making bureaucracy a dynamic condition of modernity, for state agencies and advanced private enterprise alike. Weber argued that bureaucracy enables market forms—and vice versa—rather than being their antithesis.

Advancing Weber's observation that, once in place, bureaucracies will do everything to ensure their own reproduction, the late David Graeber (2015) further proposed that ours is the "age of 'total bureaucratization'" (p. 18), where infinite aspects of existence are policed through a melding of private- and public-sector rules that together form "the iron law of liberalism" (p. 9). Bureaucracy is now such an all-encompassing cultural form, says Graeber, that it has stopped being critically analyzed: "It's as if, as a planetary civilization, we have decided to clap our hands over our ears and start humming whenever the topic comes up" (p. 5). While we were blanking, bureaucratic formations exploded. Everything from the (unread) fine print underscoring Internet subscriptions to the rules for photocopying texts for teaching purposes is caught within this omnipresent cultural form.

Neoliberal regimes of outsourcing and automating state functions, productivity rehearsals and related monitoring schema, and increased austerity measures and the "responsibilization of the subject" (Brown 2015, p. 72) have all vastly expanded bureaucracy's dominion. Summed together, such actions effectively reassign administrative labor to compliant "customers" (including employees) to reduce corporate costs and amplify shareholder dividends. The proliferation creates collective subservience. Consider the hours swallowed from repeating information to outsourced call centers chasing a repair, questioning an invoice, or altering a service. Welcome to neoliberalized bureaucracy, says Graeber (2015, pp. 19–21). With the imperatives of key performance indicators, benchmarks, and productivity invading work and leisure alike, we are conditioned to unsee the bureaucratic demands pounding everyday life-worlds. This unseeing is less bureaucratic indifference and more bureaucratic inuring (cf. Herzfeld 1992).

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Conversely, du Gay (2000) argues that ethical practices are the rare and fragile achievements of bureaucrats acting within institutions that are under attack from these same forces of deregulation and takeover. For du Gay, the powers of impersonal governance—of the kind one might wish for in, say, a public hospital emergency department—that are agnostic to race, class, citizen status, ethnicity, disability, age, sexuality, and capacity to pay are under attack. Du Gay names the culprit as "new public management" (NPM), a credo that swept through former British colonies in the 1980s and 1990s, extending a derivative version of (imagined, projected, confected) private-sector contractualism into new rules for public-sector administration (Horton 2006). The reregulation that Graeber holds responsible for burgeoning bureaucracy is, for du Gay, the remedy. When bureaucrats remember their vocation and hold true to "instituted blindness to inherited differences of standing and prestige," they are "enhancing representative democracy and social equality" (Du Gay 2020, p. 83).

Bureaucracy sucks the soul; bureaucracy is ethics in action. It stands in the way of freedom; it is freedom's insurance. It is a death threat with a baton behind its back; it is the rule of law. It has exploded under neoliberalism; it is the best defense against neoliberalism's predations. The oppositions express the anthropological challenge: How do we grapple with such a promiscuous concept?

Minimally, we could say bureaucracy exists within permanent (or better, self-perpetuating) organizational forms that enjoy an official jurisdiction and mandate for governing money and people, with specifically articulated functional powers and specified routes for appealing decisions up and down inevitable hierarchies of authority. It ostensibly operates through an architecture of rules and rituals or, as in Handelman's (2004) treatment, through the creation, implantation, and policing of taxonomies. However, these refinements still need to account for bureaucratic gray zones, where discretionary power is relationally exercised and rules are seemingly absent, suspended, or conjured arbitrarily to justify decisions and retrofit actions (Scherz 2011). The rules can appear to be impartial yet service the gathering of discriminatory intelligence or technologies of abandonment, in and beyond military, policing, and carceral environments (Feldman 2005, Lavie 2012, Bessire 2014, Shange 2019).

I prefer Wacquant's reworking of Bourdieu's bureaucratic field as "a splintered space of forces vying over the definition and distribution of public goods" (Wacquant 2010, p. 200; Bourdieu 1994), adding that these struggles concern the organized management of publicly levied money and privately expressed capital interests. Still, bureaucracies resist containment. Even when bureaucratic formations emerge temporarily, such as when a volunteer group improvises its administration to organize a spontaneous protest, to endure, these efforts will formalize. Bureaucracy is also internally self-perpetuating, spending much time encountering itself in multilayered institutional labyrinths; indeed, the work of bureaucracy is to work through its own byzantine rules and layers. These layers multiply symbiotically with external pressure to make the bureaucracy less cumbersome and entrenched. Take the demand for competitive procurement processes. These processes require rules to ensure that said competitiveness is performed, which requires new forms of scrutineering, which require monitoring protocols, and on it goes. Furthermore, bureaucracy is often at war with itself: The finance department is pitted against social service bureaus, centers against peripheries. Replacing such free-floating descriptors as red tape, blockage, maze, or indifference with more formal definitions barely helps: The concept is too labile and its literature too large.

In his review of ethnographies of bureaucracy, Heyman (2012) usefully sketched three directions that anthropologists might take to register bureaucratic surroundings. First, they could conduct deep-time analyses of how "unequal and centralized societies" (p. 1269) have emerged historically—ideally, to add my own caution, without making this a movement from the putatively

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simple to the supposedly more complex. Second, they could offer cross-cultural comparisons. An example comes from Kipnis (2008), whose comparison of different audit regimes in China, other postsocialist nations, and an American workplace throws commonplace associations between governmentality and neoliberalism into question. Kipnis provocatively argues that while the ubiquity of self-governing technologies characterizes modern bureaucratic times, these technologies correspond more to the phenomenon of compulsory schooling across diverse socioeconomic settings than to any specific neoliberalism ideology. That is, young people become self-adjusting individuals oriented to the bureaucratization of everyday life through formal education systems. Kipnis's view aligns with Crozier's depiction of bureaucratic internalization, whereby the ready ability to conform to organizational structures is educationally imbibed (Crozier 1964, pp. 184–85; Sieber 1979). It seems that sitting at desks day in and day out, competing with oneself and others, helps create bureaucracy-receptive preadults all around the world.

Kipnis's attention to ethnographic detail to make his argument orients to Heyman's (2012) third suggestion: that anthropologists might generate "rich fieldwork-based information on the workings of actual bureaucracies" (p. 1269). The following sections now turn to this last concern. My aim is to strengthen the standing invitation to analyze overdetermined bureaucratic spaces using impenitently classical anthropological tools, suggesting that too much is sacrificed if the task is only to fault-find or, the opposite, to substitute collegial dialogue for critique. We begin with "carpets" and "ghosts." Carpets represent the material configuration of classical office bureaus (carpets) and how these shape social transactions (from meetings to keyboards), whereas ghosts prompt attention to the fullness of the human belief systems and haunted fields to which anthropological curiosity would take us if actual bureaucracies were approached more open-endedly.

CARPETS AND GHOSTS

Under the separate influence of sociolinguistics and science and technology studies, anthropological work on bureaucracies has described their interactive socialization mechanisms (Schwartzman 1989, Carr 2011) and their materialities: files, cabinets, paperwork, records, and archives (Gupta 2012, Hetherington 2011, Hull 2012, Mathur 2016). In Schwartzman's hands, the ritualistic componentry of institutional meetings reveals their shared secrets. The truly high-status person (not necessarily the official figurehead) can be discerned through visual and verbal cues, the shift to matters proper taking place only when this key person signals the transition, perhaps by clearing their throat after preliminary banter or manually squaring their papers (Schwartzman 1989, pp. 75–77).

Influenced by the return to materialism in more-than-human studies, anthropologists have homed in on the social life of documents and archives (Riles 2006, Vismann 2008). Turning to Islamabad in Pakistan, for example, Hull (2012) moves beyond a deconstruction of textual content to draw attention to the "life beyond talk" encasing bureaucratic files (p. 113). As with meetings, when treated anthropologically, "[m]uch of what is important about the use of files is not documented within them" (p. 118). While file entries index approval hierarchies, with paperwork inching through vertical review processes, they also subvert later abilities to pinpoint who decided something and how they did so. In part this shrouding is because inscription practices are also warding devices, protecting authors against adverse interpretations in cloudy potential futures, because people know file records will outlast them. De-authoring anticipates document posterity. People are cautious about being blamed for something at a later time—a prudence that also explains the infamous banality of bureaucratic writing, where dull prose can be the hard-won writing achievement of freighting key changes in language so arcane that the barbs are barely perceptible (Lea 2008).

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The wholesale transformation of bureaucracies into quasi-privatized institutions has likewise been a stealth revolution led by the combination of opaque records, erasures, and prosaic wordsmithing attached to the omnipresence of information and communications technology (ICT). Promising seamless integration of legacy systems, quality control, automated information flows, and, above all, convenience, multinational software proprietors have become the irreplaceable purveyors of (somewhat customizable) highly standardized software modules to transact the common business functions within bureaucracies: think finance, procurement, and budgetary systems; human resources and payroll; customer relationship interfaces; asset inventories; and digital identity frameworks. Rapid updates and cybersecurity concerns additionally make high ICT maintenance and refreshment requirements the continuing provenance of predatory commercial providers. Employees—the very bureaucrats we reify as having tremendous discretionary powers—are forced to learn the operating rules demanded by fractal platforms with mushrooming patches and integration bridges. Complaining forlornly about the nonsensical fields and attention drain, few can fully comprehend what they are enmeshed within, for synoptic knowledge of and control over ICT infrastructural palimpsests are impossible.

In this way, machine bureaucracies have not only expanded their internal and external surveillance and control capabilities, but also laid open their operating systems to multinational vendors who find infinite new ways to mine government data and monetize internal and external transactions. Information and communication systems represent a silent cooption of state bureaucracies: ICT requires significant investments of public funds and generates the proliferating maze of interfaces identified by Graeber as "bureaucracy." And just as obtuse Pakistani file inscriptions make it difficult to later identify responsibility, "modularity is now occurring at so many levels it is hard for governments to see who is, or should be, making [their] calculations" (Brown 2020, p. 171). This opacity perhaps explains why anthropologists interested in bureaucracy's cyberforms have prioritized algorithms (Seaver 2017), databases (Bowker 2000), digital communications (Prentice 2019), logistics and data management (Pels et al. 2018), and the study of online cultures (Escobar 1994, Wilson & Peterson 2002) over detailed attention to bureaucracy's business operating systems (Hakken 1993). Yet it is the digitization of administration that has accelerated bureaucracy's tentacular expansion into the lives of individuals, families, groups, and populations—and into the lives of those who work as bureaucrats.

Close attention to ICT might enable ethnographers to ask different questions about fleshly bodies and social interference. They could, for example, explore how cyborgian bureaucrats manipulate and, in turn, are manipulated by the technologies on which they depend. Or they might examine the psychic and social effects of being the bureaucracy, which, prepandemic, involved living most of one's adult waking life in "carpet worlds" (Lea 2020, p. 27) and, postpandemic, involved spending waking life in domestic and pop-up office locations, arguably even more beholden to screens and desks. Following Foucault's (1991) invitation to consider governmentality's biopolitical prowess, multiple anthropologists have tracked the impacts of bureaucratic population programs gone awry and have given close accounts of the body as the inscription site for bureaucratically mediated economy and state powers (Ferguson & Gupta 2002, Li 2007, Mosse 2005). However, consideration of the kinds of bodies that are shaped by governmentality is favored over considering the bodies that are shaped by bureaucratic inhabitation. A search for scholarship on epigenetics and bureaucratic work, for example, underscores the general absence in any but epidemiological accounts of workplace status and stress (Rose & Marmot 1981). Yet it was increasing concern about the desk-bound captivity of public functionaries exercising unreasonable powers that generated the neologism "bureaucracy" in the first place, to describe "rule by a piece of office furniture" (Kafka 2012, p. 77).

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As traced by feminists, the bias in studies about the physicality of bureaucratic life reflects the status of the body in postmodernist theory more generally: "Ironically, nearly all of the work has been confined to the analysis of discourses *about* the body" over "attention to lived, material bodies and evolving corporeal practices" (Alaimo & Hekman 2008, p. 3, emphasis in original; Lock 2015). The neglect makes it impossible to consider pain, pleasure, or the mangled relations between the biological, the technological, and the sociocultural in bureaucracy's morphological habits. To emphasize an obvious point, bureaucracies are peopled. They represent settings that are designed, maintained, and inhabited by adult humans who spend a large proportion of their daily work shepherding money and decisions around issues that also affect other humans, nonhumans, and environments. Even as we might acknowledge that key rendering effects of statecraft are those of disembodiment and disenchantment, the better to portray grave rationality and authority, viewed anthropologically, this does not hold: Bureaucracies are peopled.

Converting individuals into abstractions may be the essence of seeing like a state (cf. Scott 1998), but being pregnant, disabled, sexually predated, amorous, adroit with legal drugs, and the right kind of bonhomie all gesture to intersectional encodings that exceed normative accounts of bureaucracy (Martin 1988, Leighton 2020). Collectively, modes of bureaucratic inhabitation represent multiple potential avenues for anthropological inquiry—and possibly a way to reclaim ethnographic territory from the Nordic filmmakers with their powerful studies of the imperiled welfare state (Brodén 2011). Perhaps sensory ethnographies could include the somatic effects of epidemic levels of myopia from endless close work (Zhou et al. 2017). Does the inability to see horizons or to understand a hunter's perspective affect how bureaucrats anticipate their regulatory impacts (Brody 1975, Nadasdy 2003)? For a more rounded approach, we might reckon with the world of cars, buses, trains, airplanes, terminals, foyers, stairwells, lifts, elevators, kitchenettes, rooms, and cubicles. These interlinked synthetic networks of enclosures and capsules are essentially bureaucratic life support systems, featuring atmospheric-, temperature-, and climate-controlling infrastructural networks (Marvin & Hodson 2018).

Gregg's (2018) account of the psychosocial toll of bracket-creeping productivity imperatives offers key starting points to thinking through the impact of living in carpet worlds, including how they solicit professional peonage. But it is Murphy's *Sick Building Syndrome* (2006) that most explicitly conjoins sex–gender orderings with architectural and environmental interventions. Murphy's account echoes Dumit's (2004) earlier work on diseases that people had to fight to have recognized and Ahmed's (2012) more recent dissection of the bureaucratization of complaint, such that complaints about institutional racism, bullying, or sexual harassment ricochet to further maim accusers. The plausible deniability of the existence of any official barriers to complaint-making strengthens their efficacy as barriers, bolstering the brick walls a person will hit without being able to identify the material location of any walls. *Sick Building Syndrome* details the physical assault on female office workers from chemical exposures, as they spend days trapped in synthetically carpeted offices, and the psychological battering enacted on complainants, whose conscription within hypermodern, window-welded environments is meant to feel privileged. Only hysterical women could propose that the clean, modern, coded-white working environments were causing their health disorders, while of course other "building ladies"—cleaners, cafeteria workers, mailroom sorters—remained altogether invisible (Murphy 2006, p. 61).

Considered from contemporary experiences of hyperautomation and outsourcing, Murphy's ethnography may today seem partially obsolete. It speaks of a time when, compared with factories, office work was ultradesirable for young white women, whose nimble-fingered keyboard labor was extracted in Taylorist office settings. Even so, dismissal of the occupational dangers of bioaccumulated toxins emitted by paint, carpets, photocopy and printer chemicals, and the fungi, molds, bacterial, and viral matter recirculating and reproduced through air-conditioning operations is

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entirely current. What is rehearsed within bureaucracies is prosecuted without them. Over and again, anthropological accounts show bureaucracy's ability to mobilize tropes of uber-rationality to formalize and negate complaint. If anything, the contemporary bureaucracy's hyperautomation has enhanced the capacity to haze its toxic responsibilities, with files (such as those documenting worker mortality risk or the distribution and determinants of industrial contaminations) reappearing as a key means for both archiving uncertainty and dodging accountability within and without institutional settings (Bond 2021; Fortun & Fortun 2005; Lerner 2010; Little 2014, 2018; Appel 2019). Uncertain epidemiology about the diseases of industrialized living is a perfect bureaucratic tactic for performing faux concern via massive systems of data assembly and regulatory review, while ensuring that little can be pinpointed for liability obligations or cessation (Murphy 2008, Razack 2015, Howey 2020). Take how cancers, for example, are diligently tracked in mortality statistics while the pollutants and substances listed as clear causes (such as exhaust fumes and alcohol) are never pulled out of the environments in which cancers proliferate (Jain 2007).

The seething, haunting influences traced by Gordon (2008), as she tracks the legacies of state-driven violence in our everyday surrounds, open new vistas on the spectral within bureaucratic settings. These vantage points could range from tracking bureaucratic evasions and inheritances to considering what kinds of past lives bureaucrats inherit in their taken-for-granted operations. Bureaucracies are libidinal spaces bursting with somatic and desiring, even spectral, subjects. Anthropologists have found ghosts living on in such institutional deathscapes as asylums and hospitals (Pinto 2018) and in modernity's signature nonplaces: international airports (Augé 1995, Ferguson 2014). Apparitional presences—textual and spectral—facilitate administrative corruption, as accusations that dead voters were conscripted in the 2020 US presidential election make clear. Should anthropologists push into the land of suits, files, and carpets, ethnographers would find specters occupying the stairwells, basements, kitchenettes, photocopy rooms, and toilets of brutalist policy bureaus too (Lea 2020). Bureaucratic life-worlds invite themselves into all domains of life, including that of the afterlife. Bubandt (2012) argues that under modernity's globalized, individualizing bureau-regimes, paranormal companions likewise find themselves administered by technologies of social improvement and governmental reason. Indonesian ghosts reflect this bureaucratic makeover, revealing the influence of international development agencies who come preloaded with theories of cultural trauma, together with recommended regimes of therapeutic self-discipline, to repair war-torn populations. As a result, even the ghosts start to reflect development discourses: They need to work on themselves to resolve their unreconciled traumas to return to their true callings as properly dead people. To paraphrase Taussig (2012), we could say not only that bureaucracy's disenchantment is fictive, but that bureaucratic enchantment necessarily erupts in uncanny ways, if only because materialist and spiritual ways of being are always mutually reinforcing.

The point is not to create cute new platforms for making the overfamiliar strange. It is to interrupt the evolutionary teleologies that bureaucracies tend to invoke and perpetuate as part of their statecraft, constantly casting themselves as inevitable and right, by instead treating bureaucracy to the full possibilities of anthropological appraisal. As with the concept of colonialism (Stoler 2016, p. 3), by casting bureaucracy as hyperrational, a temporal register is also asserted: Bureaucracies adopt a concrete fastness and lose their status as the product of human imagination, superstition, and conditional cultural practice. Everything that happens next is assumed to unfold sequentially, one policy and program, law, and funding arrangement after another. This unfolding imaginary can corral anthropological analyses too, diverting attention to evaluative accounts of this or that bureaucratic program, this or that bureaucratic failing. The ready-to-hand evaluative impulse within ethnographies reflects what Hoag (2011, p. 81) calls the "policy-practice problematic."

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Because bureaucracies are pursuing explicitly stated goals, they beckon structural-functional judgments: who manipulates, who controls, with what effects.

This evaluative imperative is a seductive summoning that requires an anthropological antidote in the form of Strathern's (1988) reminder to subject anthropological commonsense assumptions (such as the supposition that gender is binarized, or that the category "society" makes universal sense) to greater ethnographic scrutiny. That said, anthropologists are not passive consumers of the idea of functional bureaucracy. What remains to explore is the source of their willing participation in creating this ideal. In the following, I suggest that it is because anthropologists are also bureau-citizens that they desire the ideal form suggested through their critique. The struggle to correct bureaucracy's course exposes a yearning for reassurance that a more functional core exists, however inchoately our craving might be expressed.

LAMENT AND DESIRE

When decrying faults with programs, policy framings, population targeting, or organizational operation, many anthropological critiques sorrowfully imply that the service or benefit could have, should have, been otherwise. What existed before (or elsewhere) is superior to what exists now (or here). What this "otherwise" comprises, however, is often only vaguely sketched, operating as an underarticulated foil for critique, a longing for an overcoming toward . . . what? An abstracted Scandinavian perfection? A nonstate that miraculously runs communal sewer services? Instead of ethnographic thickness, or "staying with the bureaucracy" (cf. Haraway 2016), oft-as-not that which critics dislike is simply made to disappear in mandatorily hopeful concluding paragraphs, or is bloodlessly revolutionized, through appeals to grassroots coalitions, creative collaborations, democratic decision making, the wisdom of Indigenous modes of being in the world, and greater attunement to the natural environment.

Such fantastical treatments are not universal. Driven by a need to understand what they were simultaneously enmeshed within and wanting to transform, the London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (1980) used their train commute to cowrite the pamphlet *In and Against the State*. As assorted bureau-professionals (teachers, social workers, nurses, research officers, and the like), they wanted to figure out ways to serve communities, promote social justice, and fight rapacious capitalism. Using a form of lay anthropology, they considered themselves as both clients (as users of education, health, housing, aged care, and other social security services, for example) and public servants and concluded on the need to subject bureaucratic discourses to critical analysis while fighting for solidarity politics. The pamphlet remains a pertinent diagnosis and manifesto, for while it was formulated in the era of lifelong public officials, when there was at least the hypothetical possibility of correcting the course, it was also released in 1979, just as Margaret Thatcher's political reign commenced and the cult of market reform unleashed the cost-recovering public–private hybrids that characterize current hyperbureaucratized times. Ever since, far from being reformed toward liberal humanist ideals, the public sector has emptied considerable internal expertise (Rhodes 1994, Froud et al. 2017), has filled the gap with outsourced projects and the related growth of for-profit consultancy firms and nongovernment organizations (Fisher 1997, Davis 2020), and has become more impenetrable by all that fragmented ICT.

Like others with overexposure to punitive bureaucratic vicissitudes by warrant of active impoverishment–incarceration regimes (Wacquant 2009), Indigenous groups are also caught in these fragmented arrangements. The experience of many is not of a coherent master scheme, but of the promises of self-governing liberalism, with its Janus-faced demands (Povinelli 2002, Estes 2019, Vincent 2017). In Australia, for instance, the first round of responsibilization agendas were disguised in liberatory clothing: enter hard-won, community-controlled enterprises and

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organizations to counter and take the place of racist or absent state services (Sullivan 2008). Since the 1970s, community-controlled entities had to bureaucratize to survive (Rowse 1992, Kapferer 1995, Altman 2016). The Indigenous sector has been swamped by NPM contracting and acquittal overloads (Michel & Taylor 2012, Sullivan 2018) then starved by a subsequent reentry of church-based and other non-Indigenous intermediaries, who compete for shrinking funds to offer a shadow play of disjointed social services under outsourcing arrangements. Even when Indigenous and bureaucratic aspirations ostensibly align—as with "caring for country" environmental programs—the cooption is relentless (Nadasdy 2005, West 2006, Mathews 2008, Fache 2014).

So why do Indigenous and other groups keep working in, with, and through bureaucracy, despite its failures? The answer is not premised on naïve gullibility but on a more thorough appreciation of comprehensive inveiglement—and the need to use unjust systems to seek justice (Simpson 2016). Indigenous critiques of bureaucracy are not conveniently abstracted from the need to harness bureaucratic tools, in some cases by being more state than the state (Lea et al. 2018). Nuijten (2003) writes about the efforts of "ejidatarios" in Mexico who fight to recover the communal land tenure introduced after the revolution of 1910, when property formerly held by large landowners or the state could be used by peasants. Of course, this usufruct system was later overturned, and the ejidatarios have been seeking repossession of their lost rights ever since. Focusing on the village of La Canoa, in Western Mexico, Nuijten (2003) has little patience for accounts that would describe ejidatarios' forlorn recovery efforts (bribing intermediaries and bureaucrats) as representing a juvenile stage in the evolution of bureaucracy-citizen relations. Rather, it is the nature of bureaucracies, even in their most established or putatively "advanced" forms, to be sustained by the faith that people place in their efficacy (see also Hansen & Stepputat 2001). Bureaucracy, says Nuijten, is a hope-generating machine. Ejidatarios are entirely cynical, as their painful, gallows humor demonstrates (Nuijten 2003, p. 118); they invest in flash brokers with spurious connections to decision makers, knowing full well that the promises on offer are outlandish. As Nuitjen shows, people rally around their own versions of what creates change, without relying on an omnibenevolent bureaucracy, even as they pretend that bureaucratic redress exists.

In her monograph, *Fields of Desire*, High (2014) tackles a related question: What propels Lao rice farmers, development workers, bureaucrats, and academics alike to share in a critique of development programs and logics while desiring the fictive promises anyway? Asked differently, if the failure of development and poverty reduction programs is such an open secret, why is there not more assertive opposition? High's answer pivots on a psychoanalytically informed reading of desire. Development programs do not work by being structural carrots to solicit people's desire. Rather, people's desire solicits and completes structural formations. Desire slips into the gaps, lacks, and incoherent arrangements that characterize bureaucratic formations and there forgives structural incompleteness, enabling criticism and hope to coproduce one another (High 2014, pp. 175–76).

Such probes go beyond the easy assumption that bureaucracy automatically repels and alienates. It attracts. It seduces. Looked at from the inside, it is libidinal, driven by ardor and passion (Cohn 1987). What kind of desiring self exists within bureaucratic regimes? The Italian philosopher Franco Berardi (2005, 2009) offers some insights. He is concerned to describe the middle-class shift from manual to cognitive labor, regarding this shift as more than a structural transition but as something that fully involves the psychic and desiring self. Berardi is not indifferent to stiffening nerves, sore spines, and strained eyes from the unremitting screenwork of the "cognitariat" (read bureau-professional). Rather, he wants to explain its allure, to understand why cognitive workers are proactive in letting work be the most singular, most personalized, most time-consuming aspect of their lives. Why? Because the wider communities in which bureau-professionals reside have become more about the sociality of strangers than of related kin. They are

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communities where even forms of daily joy, of song or dance, are commodified, time-apportioned, and turned into an anxiety-ridden question of identity and conquest within the experience economy. As daily life is de-eroticized, desire is invested in work, the sole space left available to reaffirm identity, given the atrophy of gratifying community relations and affective communications amid increasing economic precarity and atomization. Scrabbling up and down institutional snakes and ladders is where the competitive overload and denuding of everyday life potentially find some valorized outlets.

It is not necessary to fully accept Berardi's verdict about contemporary soul-capture to admit the need to reckon with bureaucracy as a source of pleasure, even jouissance. Still, given the cultural demand to despise bureaucracy, few will admit to any administrative frisson. An exception is Brenneis (1994, 1999), who pondered what it was about national research evaluation work that so seduced his ego, luring him beyond the limits of wit and energy to meet deadlines and contribute handsomely, fully aware that the reductionist approval systems over which he was presiding were not rewarding originality but reimposing old norms. Negotiating definitions of quality and equality, he steadfastly retained ethnographic reflexivity. Yes, he enjoyed the status and power of national adjudication roles, but that was not all: The social pleasure and satisfaction of peer exhibitionism featured too.

Brenneis's enjoyment of proficiency as a "nonce bureaucrat" recollects another aspect to ethnographies of documents and files, noted by more semiotically minded anthropologists: the professional fulfilment to be had from being adroit with the exacting calibrations of bureaucratic aesthetics, wordsmithing just so (Riles 2000, p. 80). As administrative battles under contemporary liberal democratic politics have made clear, bureaucratic word nudges can also be a form of subversion, whereby policy cognoscenti might insert caveats to carve wriggle room within otherwise nasty directives or may use regulations as strongholds against brash political interference (Packer 2020). With cost-cutting austerity measures driving the public sector, and the private sector's infinite search for new ways to parse profit from everyday conduct, it seems that not only is bureaucracy's spread irrepressible; its remnant progressive charters are being strangled. It is as if every crisis is an excuse to bypass remaining checks on power to give the state the ability to do things that it was not previously authorized to do. This was Du Gay's concern: Must bureaucracy always be condemned when its progressive potential is so clearly under attack?

FORGET SOCIETY: IT IS BUREAUCRACY THAT NEEDS DEFENDING

In a series of articles reported in *The New Yorker* in 1963 and later collated as a book, Arendt (1964) famously directed attention to Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann's apparent normalcy and his ordinary determination to ascend the civil service by being extremely proficient in his observance of orders. Eichmann, she argued, was not a freakish evildoer. He was more a technocrat who suppressed and thus lost all capacity for independent thought in his yearning for extreme competency. An extension of Arendt's provocation is seeing bureaucracy itself as a neutral apparatus. As a system for organizing money, people, and accountability regimes, bureaucracy is neither malevolent nor benevolent, making it perfect for a full spectrum of uses and abuses. To repeat, it is a wholly human creation, made structural-seeming through human rituals, symbols, actions, and desires. As with official religion, when people stop believing its moral charter, the edifice weakens. This potential has always been clear to abolitionist thinkers who point to the conditionality of bureaucratic and legal systems in advocating for the possibility of better worlds (Gilmore 2007, Shange 2019).

There is a lesson in all this, concerning the need to think in and against our official systems for perpetuating and alleviating inequalities by staying true to anthropological tenets: understanding

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what we are enmeshed within, not feigning purity in denunciation. For those bureaucrats like the London–Edinburgh train-swotters for whom the work enables social justice pursuits, bureaucracy is also the site for moderating the very damages that restlessly extractive social systems reproduce. This is a widespread hope. Whether explicit or tacit, critiques of bureaucracy and of bureaucratic inveiglements retain an expectation that bureaucracies can improve. Bureaucracies should be the best of what they say they are and do the best of what they promise. These inchoate desires nipping at the heels of ethnographic critique help explain the love–hate tenor within anthropological approaches to bureaucracy.

It is time to take these attractions and repulsions seriously. They point to a key paradox: People criticize bureaucracy's imperfections because of a profound belief that a higher level of ethical functioning is not just desirable but mandated. This hope, this desire, authorizes bureaucracy's license to continue, despite failures and betrayals, on the basis that it could and should do better. If, in the place of recuperative, forgiving criticism, there is complete disdain or total rejection, then bureaucracy's claimed public benefit and aspirational charter are suffocated.

Bear & Mathur (2015) have explicitly called for a new anthropology of bureaucracy focused on "the public good" in their special journal issue on the topic. The public good is worth enunciating, they argue, because it brings into view the social contract that insiders and outsiders are both upholding when they expect bureaucracies to be beneficial. To achieve this clarity, it is also necessary to see beyond totalizing claims that the bureaucracy is fully neoliberalized and neoliberalizing. Similarly, Elyachar (2012) expresses annoyance with critics' cavalier use of "neoliberalism" to describe everything we might want to negate, while refusing to specify alternatives. Cooper (2017, 2020) has made conceptually reimagining what it means to be a state the subject of a book-length investigation. Cooper does not want to wait for an unknown future when oppressive systems have magically disappeared but instead seeks to change things in the here and now. One of her key empirical reminders is that bureaucracies are heterogeneous and, within their diversity, can offer progressive models of community organizing, not just oppressive structures.

Admittedly, bureaucracies are notoriously difficult to access as fieldsites, which has led some anthropologists to commend adjusted approaches. George Marcus, for instance, suggests that ethnographers should lose their attachment to narratives of resistance to instead recognize that the people inside institutions and corporations are close academic kin. He counsels enlisting these counterparts in "para-sites," to jointly enter dialogue and co-create ethnographic accounts (Marcus 2000). To me, this approach conflates a conceptual framing (here, the perceived overcelebration of resistance accounts) with that of method. By admitting the close kinship between academics and bureaucrats, while staying an anthropological course, we can still uncover the full panoply of human behaviors within any bureaucracy, from resistance and subversion through to full corruption. Anthropologists will find ghosts, hauntings, and variable experiences of time (sped up, slowed down, anticipated, inherited, dramatic, mundane, manipulated). Bureaucracies contain a solid density of rituals and ceremonies, pomp and drama, high excitement and dull interactions, spectacular happenings and consequential nonevents to mine. There are interactive technologies which shape and devour, neglected materialities and corporealities, sex and death, and more besides. Much can be gathered from interviewing the documents or the computer codes, from thinking about the architecture or what lies underground, in addition to bureaucracy's rich speech acts and discursive powers.

Insofar as bureaucracy is ubiquitous, manifesting across different places, sites, and times, in small- and large-scale institutions, anthropologists are already inside its accrued manifestations. Anthropologists must remember how to exchange perspectives from not-quite-inside to not-quite-outside and back again. But acknowledging imbrication is not reducible to an issue of mutual dialogue, fine technique that it is. To swiftly illustrate, consider how even the most committed

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beneficiaries of neoliberal outsourcing are now worried about the aftermath of bureaucratic hollowing. As "old mates" networks within trimmed bureaucracies atrophy, the buffer that once enabled a for-profit firm to rake in easy proceeds has also eroded: There are fewer bureaucrats with enough corporate memory to grease client–patron relationships in between outsourced contracts, let alone to absorb the more complex service work that external providers find less profitable to undertake. Sturgess (2017), an influential advocate of public-sector outsourcing in the United Kingdom and Australia, was recently commissioned by the British Business Services Association to inquire into the underlying conditions behind myriad large-scale contracting failures. He does not want the public sector to stop farming its work to external providers but recommends greater "relational" or trust-based arrangements between government agencies and those third parties that are poised to pick up the outsourced work. Consultancy firms are treated as providers of a commercial product, like exchangeable paper clips, Sturgess complained, but the human services that such firms are tasked with delivering are far more complex (i.e., less profitable). To rebuild trust, government and industry leaders should be brought closer together, recognizing their close kinship. Sound familiar?

That Sturgess's call for relationality mirrors anthropological appeals signals the need for an ethnographic vantage point, rather than ceding to sameness. Here's what I will say: Inaccessibility is a habit of mind. Approaching bureaucracies anthropologically requires building on, rather than abandoning, anthropological immersion tactics, with our "watch and (critically self) examine" imperatives, to consider bureaucracies as lively inhabitations with modalities that exceed bureaucracy's own normative claims. Being "inside" bureaucracy's distributed fields might need to be conducted from "outside" a physical bureau. After all, the brick walls a person encounters when trying to gain access still reveal contours. Call it "drawing anthropology in negative space" to help chart bureaucracy's dimensions, but do not call it a reason to jettison intensive anthropology.

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