

COMPLETE THESE FORMS IN TRIPLICATE: AN
ANARCHIST ANTHROPOLOGIST CONTEMPLATES
HOW BUREAUCRACY IS RUINING EVERYTHING

David GRAEBER, *The Utopia of Rules. On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy* (New York, Melville House Publishing, 2015)

If people hate bureaucracy, why is there so much of it? Indeed, *The Utopia of Rules* argues that every conservative effort to reduce “red tape” and promote free markets has instead the paradoxical effect of increasing bureaucracy and, with it, the “range and density of social relations that are ultimately regulated by the threat of violence” [32]. Graeber sees bureaucracy as a powerful force that largely escapes contemporary attention—powerful perhaps in part *because* it escapes attention. People are habituated to bureaucracy, unthinkingly accepting bureaucracy as the natural and neutral substrate of our daily lives, and thereby tacitly complicit in our own iron-caging. Graeber suggests that bureaucratic tasks have even escaped the anthropologic gaze—so focused on ritual, symbolism, and performativity—because they are made to appear boring and non-ceremonial. The book draws attention to the creeping stranglehold of “total bureaucratization,” Graeber’s term for the mutual imbrication of state and business, tied together by bureaucracy, the “fusion of public and private power into a single entity, rife with rules and regulations whose ultimate purpose is to extract wealth in the form of profits” [18]. Graeber invites a conversation about how this chimeric fusion of state and capitalist power, with bureaucracy as its handmaiden, came to be and how it affects human flourishing, thereby sketching out the grounds of a radical leftist critique of bureaucracy. Graeber explains that the chapters are not meant to build coherently into a single argument, but rather to begin a conversation critiquing bureaucracy and its entanglements with 1) violence, 2) technology, and 3) rationality and value.

The book resists neat categorization. It is obviously a “big think” book, yet claims not to be a coherent theory. Neither is it empirical in the classic social anthropological sense of being beholden to deep ethnographic data of a circumscribed set of peoples or places, like Evans-Pritchard with the Nuer. Instead, it is a wild and thought-provoking ride through a well-read mind, drawing variously from relatable everyday observations, popular fiction, personal experience

520

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of social movements, and synthesized findings of anthropological research to illustrate claims and bolster support for arguments. In its pages one encounters Franz Kafka, *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, and *Lord of the Rings*, alongside Arrighi, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and Foucault. A reflection on *Star Wars* leads to a reinterpretation of the origins of postmodernism. Musing on the parallels between bureaucratic and theoretical knowledges results in a structural analysis of Sherlock Holmes and James Bond as dialectical charismatic heroes of bureaucracy. This tendency will appeal enormously to some readers. The book is thought-provoking, offering any number of observations that may stick with the reader. For example, Graeber observes that in the self-professed greatest democracy on earth, millions of ATM machines operate without once dispensing incorrect cash, but we accept a margin of error in voting machines. It is certainly readable and engaging enough to use in an advanced undergraduate course. It would likely generate excited conversation if students were given freedom to engage it merely to stimulate intellectual curiosity.

In deference to the author's vision of disparate but related essays, the three essays are treated separately below. Yet one can observe a broader arc laced through them. Across all three essays, Graeber traces the evolution of bureaucracy and its particular, changing relationship to human imagination and well-being. Even as a critic of bureaucracy, Graeber admits that previously in history, bureaucracy *was* an impressive organizational technology capable of accomplishing unimaginable feats—as the early modern German postal service dazzled elites and everyday citizens alike with its unparalleled effectiveness. Under the competitive political pressure of the Cold War, the state deployed bureaucratic organization to marshal impressive technological innovations that were not merely military, but also improved the daily lives of citizens. Citizens thereby came to expect, and even value, large formal organizations in their lives. But the radical movements of the 1960s frightened elites atop corporate and state hierarchies of power, who feared that further transformative innovation (including the possibility of labor unrest through advanced mechanization) coupled with free-thinking would upset the existing status quo in which they enjoyed a privileged position.

Graeber argues that the 1970s therefore became a pivotal moment when those elites increasingly deployed technological innovation and bureaucracy as means to monitor, suppress, and otherwise pacify citizens, especially labor. Bureaucracy came to be associated not with dazzling efficiency, but with unfathomable, detailed, procedural

requirements whose only true purpose seemed to be rendering applicants stupefied. Bureaucracy became stupid because it was being deployed as a tool for legitimating and buttressing a system of gross structural inequalities. Bureaucracy, the state, and corporate capitalism were knit increasingly closely together; they had become so inter-penetrated that it had become difficult to say where one ends and the other begins.

This chimera utilized the tools of the state—bureaucracy, rule of law, and threat of violence both real and symbolic—to protect capitalist interests. It also created new opportunities for low-risk profit thanks to an ever-expanding maze of formal bureaucratic requirements, such as the rise of credentialism and continuing education across professional fields, from which capitalist funders could capture a share of interest. The implicit imagery is eerily reminiscent of the human farm in *The Matrix*, where humans live simulated lives devoid of real choice while their machine overlords steadily siphon their life-force to power the machine. Everyday citizens have been complicit, perhaps habituated to bureaucracy and thereby tricked into equating that which is ubiquitous with that which is necessary, or perhaps duped into fearing the transformative potential of unfettered human imagination and preferring instead to struggle to win within the rules of the safe “game” of bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy, violence, stupidity, and imagination

Graeber discusses the mostly invisible connections between bureaucracy and violence by first drawing attention to structural violence, defined as “forms of pervasive social inequality that are ultimately backed up by the threat of physical harm” [57]. He notes that both bureaucracy and structural violence exercise their power not in the loud ways that proclaim power openly, and both tend to create “willful blindness” [57]. Though expressly about violence, the first essay is motivated by the question lurking behind every popular joke about bureaucracy: why are bureaucratic procedures so stupid? It opens with the story of attempting to wrest official control of his mother’s affairs after she was rendered bedridden by a stroke. This is a classic lament of bureaucratic “red tape” and labyrinthine requirements, grounded in the experience of trying to successfully complete the necessary paperwork, with conditions for success that seemed to shift seismically depending on which of the various players was instructing Graeber.

Why does bureaucracy render participants stupid? To answer, Graeber introduces an insightful concept: “imaginative” or “interpretive” labor. Imaginative labor is a kind of intensely inter-subjective orientation that is unevenly distributed as a consequence of structural inequalities in power. That is, those in low status positions expend tremendous effort to understand the perspectives, desires, and whims of those above them, but that effort is never reciprocated. The maid must imagine the desires of the mistress, but the mistress thinks little on the maid. Thus, even well-intended bureaucracies yield “absurdities.” Not because bureaucracies are inherently stupid, but because “they are ways of organizing stupidity—of managing relationships that are already characterized by extremely unequal structures of imagination, which exist because of the existence of structural violence” [81]. Violence can force others to act in predictable ways even without the interpretive labor of understanding them, and once sufficiently monopolized, physical violence gives way to less visible but equally powerful forms of violence while still obviating the need to understand another’s point of view. Graeber connects the idea of imaginative labor to canonical intellectual arguments. For example, imagination and futures are linked to Marx’s work on proletariats, noting, “The subjective experience of living inside such lopsided structures of imagination—the warping and shattering of imagination that results—is what we are referring to when we talk about ‘alienation’” [94].

Seeking to reclaim the possibility of creative, visionary, progressive politics, the book observes that historical examples of the emergence of such transformative thinking typically occur within a context of “insurrectionary upheavals” [97]. Insurrectionary upheavals free people from the cognitive blinders that structure our daily sense of what is possible, legitimate, or realistic—structuring categories including “the public, the workforce, the electorate, consumers, the population” and attendant actions deemed legitimate and realistic for those categories, which “are the product of bureaucracies and institutional practices” [99]. Graeber then sees insurrectionary moments as enabling the flourishing of social creativity because they disrupt our taken-for-granted categories and ways of being, unshackling the imagination.

Moments in this essay are deeply thought-provoking, casting taken-for-granted aspects of daily life in a new light. Yet the larger vision is at times compelling but not entirely convincing, largely because no alternative interpretations are addressed, and the

foundational presumption is that we will all agree bureaucracy is willfully stupid (perhaps for malicious reasons). Imaginative labor is an intriguing idea, casting insightful light on some imbalances characterized by structural violence and inequality, whether a maid and employer, or a young black man confronting police. Yet “bureaucratic stupidity” seems to exist in a number of conditions not as readily characterized by that conceptual coupling of structural violence and unequal imaginative labor. Like most, I too have experienced the frustration of bureaucratic run-around, recently while trying to file an expense report for university travel with my academic spouse. Everyone I spoke with was unfailingly polite and eager to help. None seemed to offer bad advice because they rested atop some status hierarchy and could not be troubled to do the imaginative labor of understanding another perspective.

Rather, in my view, a more plausible explanation rests with the discrete jurisdiction at the heart of much large formal organization (this may belie my different position in the disciplinary fields of taste). Discrete jurisdiction enables greater specialization, a feature at the heart of many benefits of large formal organization. But it also means that few people have a comprehensive view of an entire process. This lack of a holistic view produces the experience of stupidity when seeking advice. If we navigate bureaucratic rules as an unusual case—as a married couple travelling together on business—few have the expertise of how to respond to us because their daily experience of procedures privileges modal cases. Alternatively, if we navigate the system as a model case, we are sometimes exposed to rules that seem to make no sense, because rare-but-impactful events (i.e., a bomb in an air-passenger’s shoe) result in rules that are seemingly unintelligible to modal cases. We each seem to expect to experience a system that fits our case perfectly yet, whether modal or unusual, each will encounter moments that are ill-designed for ourselves. Moreover, like the proverbial baseball umpire who is invisible until he is abused for a decision we do not like, our perceptual bias is to overlook bureaucratic systems when they work well and give oversized attention to unintelligibly inconvenient experiences.

Bureaucracy and the failed promise of technological innovation

This essay recalls the exuberant predictions of prior generations about the technological advancement that would have come to pass by

the 21st century, when all transportation would surely involve hover boards, flying cars, and teleportation. Graeber cautions readers against dismissing this gap between prior imagination and present state as merely the overactive imagination of the past. Instead, he asks why the present day has failed to accomplish the reasonable technological advances previously imagined, noting that across a variety of scientific and technological fields, using a variety of measures, the rate of scientific advancement has leveled off since the 1970s.

The book argues that around the 1970s there was a seismic shift from developing technologies geared towards imagined or alternative futures, towards investment in technologies that afforded discipline and social control. Graeber suggests this shift occurred because corporate and conservative political elites—reflecting on the radical upheavals of the 1960s—feared technological advances could disrupt their advantaged position in structures of power. They therefore created bureaucratic structures to monitor and control those advances, for example Newt Gingrich's Office of Technology Assessment. Even innovations that may seem beneficial to the public—what about the internet!—are reframed as tools of oppression of the masses, just as information technology instead benefits financialization, increases workers' debt, destroys job security under the guise of flexible work, and increases working hours as we work from home.

Entwined with the neoliberalism of the 1980s, corporate capitalism came to value the risk-averse pursuit of short-term gain and stability above all else, eschewing the dangers that potentially transformative innovation could bring to the existing hierarchies of power. Graeber poetically observes, "Given a choice between a course of action that will make capitalism seem like the only possible economic system, and one that will make capitalism actually be a more viable long-term economic system, neoliberalism has meant always choosing the former" [129]. Neoliberal changes that ended job security and increased employee working hours were not the boon for workforce productivity explicitly espoused, but certainly succeeded in de-politicizing labor. As this corporate market ethos spread to new non-market domains under the valorization of efficiency and market competition, it brought orientations and technologies with it that were designed to favor risk-aversion over transformative innovation. This is why, he notes, scientists must now spend most of their waking hours filling out paperwork for grants that will only succeed in a grant competition if granters can be assured the research will yield successful results. This effectively forces everyone to hunk and no one to

swing for the fences, where the truly technologically innovative “home run” might wait amid a forest of strike-outs.

This essay, and the book broadly, explicitly aims to critique bureaucracy. However, throughout the narrative the unspoken antagonist and protagonist seem to switch roles without comment. When thinking of social imagination and revolution, the government is the antagonist, and bureaucracy its cudgel. Later, when talking about the rate of innovation, bureaucracy is heralded as state-led innovation for the public good—a man on the moon! washing machines!—juxtaposed with lamentable technologies of profit and control in the present capitalist-led era. Though the actor wearing the antagonist role has changed, the tool (or weapon?) wielded is still bureaucracy. This raises important questions of whether the core driving antagonist of the book is really bureaucracy *per se*—as a form of large formal organization conceptually distinct from (though empirically entwined with) states and capitalist corporations. These shifting lines of culpability raise important questions about whether bureaucracy is merely a tool, whose benevolence or malevolence depends on those who use it, or a force unto itself. And if a tool, is bureaucracy a tool like a wrench—implicitly useful though capable of harm—or is bureaucracy a tool like a gun, with a greater tacit association to malevolent use?

Does the fault lie with bureaucratic organization *per se*? Graeber’s admiration of the accomplishments of bureaucracy past would seem to undermine such an argument, from putting a man on the moon to the dazzling successes of the German postal service, to ancient Egyptians mastering administration and human organization to create the pyramids. There Graeber sees bureaucratic organization as a tool in service of the human imagination, “poetic technologies [...] the use of rational, technical, bureaucratic means to bring wild, impossible fantasies to life” [141]. Though explicitly focused on critiquing bureaucracy, the mechanics Graeber identifies as responsible for reducing and refocusing human ingenuity rest more clearly with a capitalist corporate mindset, which eschews uncertainty and valorizes efficiency in pursuit of readily-measurable and maximizable profit. That capitalist market ethos has spread to new domains with plural, often poorly measurable goals (e.g. health or well-being), in which competition is not a natural structure for adjudicating. Importing a market logic to domains for which it is poorly suited induces its own kind of stupidity, that academic scholarship and newspaper accounts have increasingly highlighted.

Making academics compete for rewards by measuring the number of publications—intended to incentivize productivity—instead results in subdividing findings into the greatest number of sub-par incremental papers.¹ The effort to hold teachers accountable for student evaluation scores, instead contributes to fewer assignments and greater grade inflation.² Efforts to improve patient care by tying Medicare reimbursement to patient satisfaction scores leads hospitals to focus not on making people *well*, but rather on making people *happy* by giving them what they want, whether it be big screen TVs or medically unnecessary antibiotics.³

Dr. Strange bureaucracy: or how I learned to stop playing and love the rules

This essay, aimed at rationality and value, asks why bureaucracy persists even though no one seems to love it. Graeber acknowledges that bureaucrats make themselves indispensable to the powerful via specialized knowledge, and that there are moments—such as the distribution of life-saving organs—when even an ideal future might require a system of impersonal rules-based decisions. But above these considerations, he advances a thesis that people feel safer within the constraints of rules, arguing “what ultimately lies behind the appeal of bureaucracy is a fear of play” [193]. Both play and games can be fun, but in games one seeks to best the rules and arrive at a pre-ordained winning condition, whereas play is the freewheeling, creative, emergent phenomena with sometimes dangerous or violent ends. Under the attractive rhetoric of democracy and wielding the tools of bureaucratic administration—including the bureaucratized violence of police—modern states have proliferated rules asserting greater and greater control over more spheres of human activity. The reach and power of those rules, regulating beverage consumption and billboard sizes, is grounded in the fundamental belief that the creative and destructive potential of unbridled play is terrifying. Within that worldview, people experience rules, with their game-like legibility, as freedom from that terror.

¹ Marc A. Edwards and Siddhartha Roy, 2017, “Academic Research in the 21st Century: Maintaining Scientific Integrity in a Climate of Perverse Incentives and Hyper-competition”, *Environmental Engineering Science*, 34(1): 51-61.

² *ibid.*

³ Alexandra Robbins, 2015, “The Problem with Satisfied Patients”, *The Atlantic*, April 17.

Graeber finds evidence of this essential tension between rules and their antithesis in historical comparisons across vast social and temporal differences. Archeological records document heroic societies located always at the fringes of the great ancient commercial-bureaucratic empires of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, China, or Rome. These heroic societies and commercial-bureaucratic empires had symbiotic yet oppositional identities, each embracing the antithesis of the other: barbarian chaos against orderly scribes; ceremonial potlatch destruction of value against scrupulous managing of commercial wealth. In this historical template he sees both the relation of politics to administration within the modern state, but also the antidote to our present value-neutral bureaucratic era in the allure of fantasy video games for modern workers stultified in their positions, and retrospective romanticizing of good vs. evil in medieval times. He argues that these antithetical contrasts serve to ideologically inoculate people to a (bureaucratic) system of authority by pointing to an opposite that is vicariously thrilling to imagine, “only to ultimately recoil in horror at the implications of one’s own desires” [181].

Conclusion

Bureaucracy is threaded throughout the book, ostensibly the target of its ire yet often guilty by association, implicated in a web that Graeber sees as increasingly constraining human flourishing. Despite being the stated focus of the book, scholars of bureaucracy may be disappointed with how little conceptual engagement “bureaucracy” itself receives. Most often, bureaucracy seems to be equated simply with “administration,” as in any large formalized organization. This is a well-represented conflation in popular non-academic thought, but with which academics in sociology and political science might disagree. Although not explicitly stated, Graeber seems to define bureaucracy more according to a select few of the most scorned Weberian characteristics—paperwork or rules—and dismisses potentially beneficial characteristics like meritocracy as mere fantasy. Such a conceptualization also neglects bureaucracy’s animating ethos of impersonal administration oriented to accomplishing organizational goals on behalf of an abstract collective. Except for a brief nod at organ donation, this too he seems to dismiss as a fantasy. Yet some would argue that real gains in human well-being have been brought about as people otherwise

marginalized from interpersonal networks of power have leveraged bureaucratic rules and procedures to gain access that would have been unimaginable prior to bureaucratization—from disability rights and affirmative action in the United States to women's political empowerment through quota systems or proportional representation for ethnic minority groups in various African countries.

This book raises thought provoking questions about the regulation of modern human life, but it is not a balanced evaluation of the role bureaucracy plays in modernity. Bureaucracy is squarely cast as a villain, but conversely, the author may be guilty at times of wearing rose-colored glasses that valorize any non-bureaucratic form of organization as innately positive and without flaw. The 1960s rebels are the stuff of “individual expression and spontaneous conviviality” [5]. The NY Direct Action Network (DAN) was a “decentralized network, operating on principles of direct democracy according to an elaborate, but quite effective, form of consensus process” [84] until it was ensnared in formal organizing and bureaucracy when someone donated a car to the effort. He laments moments that potentially transformative modern anarchist movements were instead coopted and consumed by bureaucratizing, from the Occupy Wall Street movement to early feminist consciousness raising circles.

For Graeber, bureaucracy, cloaked from attention by its mind-numbing mundanity and inanity, has been the means by which great harm has been done to human society: “bureaucracy has been the primary means by which a tiny percentage of the population extracts wealth from the rest of us, they have created a situation where the pursuit of freedom from arbitrary power simply ends up producing more arbitrary power, and as a result, regulations choke existence, armed guards and surveillance cameras appear everywhere, science and creativity are smothered, and all of us end up finding increasing percentages of our day taken up in the filling out of forms” [205]. Graeber seems to long for some alternative, and clearly deeply admires all forms of non-bureaucratic organizing such as those found in radical social movements. Yet, ultimately, readers will receive no compelling vision of a practicable alternative, except perhaps for the hope that unfettering human imagination, engaging in play, embracing risk and the probability of failure in pursuit of the potential of transformation, might help us imagine a new alternative future free of bureaucracy.

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Until then, to paraphrase Winston Churchill's famous words on democracy, no one pretends that bureaucracy is perfect or wise. Indeed, bureaucracy is the worst form of organizing, except for all the others that have been tried from time to time.

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