

B O O K S R E V I E W

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BUREAUCRATIC UTOPIA RECONSIDERED*

Review of: David Graeber (2015), *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, Brooklyn: Melville House.

As a lecturer in organization theory, I am often confronted with the task of explaining the meaning of the term “bureaucracy.” In everyday parlance, we mainly use this word as an invective: another incomprehensible form from a governmental agency or another hour waiting on the telephone, only to receive another meaningless answer from a company’s customer service. Yet bureaucracy can be a savior: When an autocratic leader tries to implement unethical regulations, a stubborn bureaucrat enforcing the rule of law may be our last hope. In organization theory, however—and herein lays the lecturer’s challenge—the word is most often used in a technical sense. Bureaucracy means “the rule of rules”: a private or public organization governed by a set of rules for what should be done, how it should be done, and who is supposed to do it. Central features of this ideal-typical order are efficiency, fairness, and transparency.

After having read David Graeber’s book, *The Utopia of Rules*, this technical approach to bureaucracy feels a bit naïve.

David Graeber is an American anthropologist, and a professor at the London School of Economics since 2013. He is well known for his theoretical work, including *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (Graeber 2001), for his epic

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Debt: The First 5000 Years (Graeber 2012), and for having written several contributions to public debate. He is also known for his activism, being a leading character in the Occupy movement. In *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, he addresses the phenomenon of bureaucracy and delivers a massive broadside from the left.

Critique of bureaucracy is nothing new, of course; it is a topic embraced from such diverse angles as classical sociology and classical economics (Bauman 1989; Crozier 1964; von Mises 1944), and also from pop management (Peters 2003). But Graeber manages to revitalize the topic and introduce new perspectives. The book comprises three independent essays encompassing different takes on the phenomenon of bureaucracy. Graeber's line of reasoning is intricate, and it meanders delightfully among various angles and ideas and between social science and popular culture (Star Trek, James Bond, Lord of the Rings, and Harry Potter included).

In the first essay, Graeber attacks the very foundation of bureaucracy. The theoretical ideal-type is a transparent and value-neutral form of organization. The key figure of bureaucracy, Max Weber (1864–1920), imagined ideal-type bureaucracy as founded solely on legal authority (Weber 1968). Graeber, on his part, claims that bureaucracy is ultimately founded on “violence in its literal sense: the kind that involves, say, one person hitting another over the head with a wooden stick” (p. 58). If you stop paying your rent and stubbornly refuse to leave your apartment, the police will eventually drag you out of your home. This latent threat of violence places subjects in a bureaucratic order in a precarious position, as they must always interpret the language of bureaucracy and the bureaucrat. Bureaucracy always has the upper hand. Imagine filling out a form, this hallmark of bureaucracy: It is not the bureaucracy that adapts to your world, to your language; it is you who must adapt, and you suffer the consequences of misunderstanding. It is you who won't get that reimbursement in time. Bureaucrats do not listen. They cannot change perspectives. And they need not, because ultimately they can resort to violence. “In practice, bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae” (p. 75). Bureaucracies are by nature characterized by “structural stupidity”—a stupidity to which the subject can only subject.

If bureaucracy in the first essay is depicted as limiting imagination and producing stupidity in the present, Graeber's second essay engages with the ways in which bureaucracy kills the dreams of the future. Whereas the 20th century was characterized by progressive and grandiose projects, space travel being the prime example, most of the futuristic dreams about a liberated high-tech future have ground to a halt in the bureaucratic machinery. The intelligent machines, the flying cars, the phaser weapons, or those robots doing most manual labor did not come into being. Instead of revolutionary technological progress—Graeber even describes the Internet as merely “a super-fast and globally ac-

cessible combination of library, post office, and mail order catalog” (p. 132) — we have mainly ended up with technologies facilitating social control. Bureaucracy is, in itself, such a technology. Universities, once sanctuaries for free-thinking eccentrics, are now the home of people concerned mainly with their own brand. Administration thrives in “an environment that might as well have been designed to strangle any actual manifestations of imagination and creativity in the cradle” (p. 134). The antipode—the market and its entrepreneurs—is, in reality, a marginal phenomenon, Graeber argues. Most research and development is actually undertaken in an industrial–academic complex dominated by bureaucratic needs for short-term applicability and tangible results. This milieu efficiently marginalizes any Utopian ideas and thereby stifles attempts at imagining other futures.

Why do we accept this order of things? Graeber poses that question in the third and final essay. The answer is two-fold.

On the one hand, bureaucracy embodies a romanticized ideal of efficiency, with its origin in the 19th century German post office. This was, in fact, Weber’s main source of inspiration to the bureaucratic ideal-type and a significant explanation for his link between bureaucracy and efficiency. The German post office inspired other organizations, among them the US post office. They had both been efficient organizations for their time, and evolved into images of an alternative social and economic order. Diverse movements such as communism, anarchism, and progressive capitalism in the United States saw the post office as an exemplar. Today we see the same ideas projected on the Internet, e-mail, and social media—which, just like paper mail, Graeber notes, have become a significant channel for marketing. They have also become tools for established bureaucracies, feeding us bills, taxation, and forms for interacting with politicians and their bureaucratic representatives. At the heart of bureaucracy is its frictionlessness. When the (e-)mail arrives as expected we hardly notice the system that brought it to us. The system disappears into the background. It just works. Herein lies the seduction of bureaucracy: It becomes an invisible rational means for fulfilling our dreams.

On the other hand—and this is Graeber’s second answer—bureaucracy is a way of exorcising disorder. Here Graeber makes another excursion into popular culture—this time into fantasy literature. If science fiction can create dreams beyond the limitations of bureaucracy, fantasy provides a counterpoint. Bureaucracy is about value neutrality; fantasy worlds are inevitably caught in the eternal struggle between Good and Evil, making neutrality impossible. Bureaucracy is about rules, wherein formal roles precede personalities; fantasy heroes and villains are charismatic usurpers of bureaucratic order (think Conan the Barbarian or even Harry Potter). Bureaucracy is about transparency; fantasy worlds are full of riddles, mysteries, strange powers, and prophecies. Again, it is the ideal-type bureaucracy, not real-life bureaucracy, which is under scrutiny. But to some extent, that is the point of this structuralist analysis: “Fantasy

literature then, is largely an attempt to imagine a world utterly purged of bureaucracy, which readers enjoy both as a form of vicarious escapism and as a reassurance that ultimately, a boring, administered world is probably preferable to any imaginable alternative” (p. 186–187). Whereas fantasies and fantasy literature tells us how things could be, they do so by flirting with disorder and limitlessness, a feeling that is satisfying only in our imagination. In practice, bureaucratic rule disciplines this unbridled, playful mode of being, making life safe and secure.

Critique of bureaucracy is nothing new. A number of classic texts problematizing the role of bureaucracy have been published. (And some in defense; see, e.g., du Gay 2000.) It is also a common theme in literature; Franz Kafka, George Orwell, and Joseph Heller come to mind. Thus, Graeber is not alone in his dystopic view. His contribution is a systematic anthropological perspective. His argument incorporates a certain playfulness. In effect, the book becomes a practical anti-bureaucratic text, with breakneck juxtapositions and polarities contributing insight. The anarchistic position is clear, and in this Graeber wants to formulate an alternative, a way out of the iron cage of bureaucracy. (See Baehr 2001, however, who fundamentally questions the use of the “iron cage” metaphor.)

This alternative is not easy to follow, however. In several instances, Graeber refers to his other works, but most such routes remain underdeveloped. He insists that there are possibilities for developing other structures of authority that do not stifle the fantasy and play that maintain creativity and undermine illegitimate constellations of power. Exactly what such structures look like and how they function, is omitted, giving these propositions an unfortunate flavor of *naïveté*. As has often been noted, hierarchies tend to emerge, become sediment, and persist in nearly every social context (Pfeffer 2013). The examples mentioned by Graeber—the Occupy movement, for instance—seem temporary at best, as phenomena whose existence have had no significant effect on the bureaucratic orders they attempt to subvert. A suspicion that bureaucracy and its power, ultimately based on violence, can be subverted only by violence skulks between the lines.

Moreover, bureaucracy as presented by Graeber is an abstract construct. It exists as a kind of machinery, independent of and unpopulated by human beings. (The exemption being police officers enforcing bureaucratic rule by swinging truncheons.) The analysis becomes equally abstracted and schematic. A good example is the discussion on structural stupidity, highlighting the inability and unwillingness of bureaucracy to interpret and contextualize. This line of reasoning presents a purely external view. If we shift our gaze to the inside, from bureaucracy to bureaucrats, we see a continuous process of interpretation. When formulating abstract systems of rules, it is impossible to make them immediately applicable, and the more generic they are, the more they must be interpreted in order to make sense in a given context. There are, in all

bureaucracies, an army of street-level bureaucrats, whose job it is to interpret and contextualize the rules and regulations in relation to specific cases (Lipsky 2010). And it is not difficult to imagine that even bureaucrats have a soul and a conscience. In fact, many controversies originate in bureaucrats not having been bureaucratic enough, from their having deviated from rules and regulations. In *The Utopia of Rules*, however, the bureaucrats amount to little more than incarnations of rules, to cogs in the bureaucratic machinery. On one level, this is not a problem to Graeber's analysis, which is intended to be abstract and generic. At the same time, this turns into one of the things a lecturer in organization theory will caution students about: that bureaucracy is an ideal-type, that pure bureaucracies do not exist, and neither do pure bureaucrats. Contested terrain and ambiguities will persist, and if we really want to understand bureaucracy, we need to direct our gaze inwards, into the machinery—and perhaps discover the flesh and blood of bureaucracy. To this end, *The Utopia of Rules* can provide an entry point. But it is apparent that the last word on bureaucracy remains unsaid.

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