
Postscript

Anthropology, Bureaucracy and Paperwork



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For a long time, anthropologists shied away from the study of bureaucracy. In fact, the ethnographic study of bureaucracy was largely initiated outside anthropology – that is, in political science – with Michael Lipsky’s (1980) seminal study on street-level bureaucrats, as well as in sociology (Crozier 1963), while in anthropology early authors like Don Handelman and Elliot Leyton (1978), Gerald Britan and Ronald Cohen (1980) and Josiah Heyman (1995) for a long time remained on their own. After 2000, there were two major drivers intensifying anthropologists’ interest towards bureaucracies. The somewhat older one was development anthropology, which, in line with the evolution of development policies themselves, shifted its focus from projects to global public policies, development agencies and public bureaucracies (Olivier de Sardan 2005; Bierschenk 2014). Arguably of more impact, however, was the so-called migration crisis of the past ten years – which was, rather, a crisis of state bureaucracies in dealing with different forms of migration. While the migration crisis, for the anthropological profession, must be considered a windfall, as it has been providing its practitioners with new, unexpectedly large and often well-funded fields of scholarly and practical engagement (see the critical review by Cabot 2019), anthropologists also slowly expanded their vision from the originally exclusive focus on the figure of the migrant to that of the bureaucrat. In this process, linked to the by now established field of the anthropology of

the state, 'the study of bureaucracy has become a standard prerogative of English-language [and French, and German!] anthropology in recent years' (El Khachab 2018). 'Recent' is the correct word: the large majority of topical texts cited in the contributions to this book are no older than ten years.

On the other hand, the study of organizations – of which bureaucracy is an ordering principle – had actually already been initiated by anthropologists back in the 1920s (Schwartzman 1993: 1–26). Some of the early findings can be taken for granted now: there is always a gap between organizational norms and practices; large-scale organizations are heterogeneous phenomena (theorized by sociological institutionalism with the concept of 'loose coupling' [Weick 1976]; Lindberg and Borrelli, this volume); implementation is a fragmented process, always also going in unplanned directions (Pressman and Wildavsky [1973] 1984). All contributors to this book subscribe to such views. There is also early work by sociologists on the ethics of bureaucracy and bureaucrats, starting with Max Weber and including for example Richard Hilbert (1987) and Thomas Osborne (1994); anthropologists have added interesting findings to this study of bureaucrats' ethical and affective labour, even when they are crafting depersonalized documents (Andretta, this volume). One area where interactionist sociology has been in advance over anthropology, with the latter slowly catching up, was in the ethnographic study of (semi-)professionals whose work has a strong bureaucratic aspect, like police officers or medical personnel (Becker et al. 1961; Bittner 1967).

The long-time aversion of many anthropologists to positioning themselves, epistemologically speaking, with the bureaucrat – which means taking bureaucrats, in Malinowskian fashion, as the 'natives' and trying to see the world with their eyes, being interested in what they think and say about themselves – might have been an effect of the genetic imprint on the discipline. This genetic imprint seems to linger on in the recent enthusiasm of many anthropologists for the topical writings of David Graeber (2015), a political manifesto based on anecdotal evidence framed by anarchist convictions which might be considered a typical first-world luxury – certainly by my African colleagues (Bierschenk 2021). For it could very well be argued, also contra the much-cited James Scott (1998), that the (Global) South needs more, and not less, bureaucracy and stateness, provided it is well functioning (see Metzker 2017). Anthropology, up to the present day, is fascinated by the margins, the peripheral, the exotic and subaltern. The anthropology of the state tellingly started in the margins (Asad 2004) before recently moving more closely to its centres.

Bureaucrats as the Evil Twins of Anthropologists

I propose that in addition to this genetic imprint, there might be another, subcutaneous reason for this aversion: bureaucrats are the unrecognized ‘evil twins’ of anthropologists. After all, as writers, do we not essentially do a similar type of ‘thought-work’ (Heyman 1995): enquire, summarize, translate, select information, categorize, draft – that is, establish – paperwork? Inspired by a particular worldview, and with a particular audience in mind? Do we not, as writers, obey aesthetic rules analogous to those which Mirco Göpfert (2013) has beautifully described for the case of African gendarmes? Do we not also try to formulate authoritative statements on the world and attempt to impose them on others? And do we not, as fieldworkers, find those people most despicable who are the closest to us – that is, in our case, tourists? This aversion to the ones who are most similar to us would not surprise a psychologist, who might call it transference – that is, seeing (parts of) yourself in the other.

Furthermore, migration bureaucrats resemble anthropologists in another, more immediate way. Insofar as asylum bureaucrats, nongovernmental organization (NGO) officials and police officers produce cultural knowledge about their clients, they might be called para-ethnologists (Lindberg and Borrelli; Andreetta – both this volume; see also Islam 2015; Beek and Bierschenk 2020). In fact, they might even have been trained as anthropologists, as many people active in the management of migration nowadays are. But in any case, as scientist-practitioners they must professionally deal with cultural diversity and do their own theorizing, produce cultural analysis of what they see and experience, much of it in written form, and some of it directly influenced by academic anthropology.

At first glance, the difference between this kind of para-ethnology and academic anthropology seems to lie, first, in the fact that para-ethnology does not serve pure knowledge production but is oriented to action and problem-solving. It produces applied, or applicable, knowledge in the organization and is supposed to assist in decision-making. However, on further inspection, this distinction is not as clear as it first seems to be, as academic ethnographic research in modern organizations is also always faced with the expectation that it would be of benefit to the organization, or some of its members (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2019).

Complicit Positionings

This points to a particular positioning of the anthropologist of bureaucracies, a topic which is taken up only in passing in this book. I want to underline three characteristics of bureaucracies as objects of study with

strong epistemological implications. One of the defining characteristics of any organization is its strong boundary management. This strict gatekeeping means research always needs to be done in explicit cooperation with the organization, or at least part of it, more specifically with its leadership. The researcher is thus in a particular reciprocity relationship with the informants, and they are increasingly expected to give something back. Furthermore, the anthropologist of bureaucracy must assume that the people under study will actually read what they write – a situation which mainstream anthropology encountered only much later in the context of postcolonial anthropology, when the ‘native started to write back’. In this sense, anthropologists of organizations might be called ‘embedded anthropologists’ (as Andretta and Nakueira hint at in their chapters in this volume). This obviously raises the question of the analytical independence of the researcher.

Second, the ethnography of bureaucracy is confronted with a particular nexus between basic research and its impact on reality. In organizational research, rendering research results – at least, to the ‘bosses’ – is almost obligatory. Thus, the anthropology of organizations and of public bureaucracies, in many cases, has an applied dimension, at least in the eyes of the organization’s heads. This applied aspect must often be inserted, right from the beginning, into the research approach itself, even if the main objective of the research is academic, and may lead to a ‘complicit positioning’ of the researcher coming from the outside (Sedgwick 2017).

Third, working at the interface of basic and applied research, from very early on, anthropologists of organizations have been confronted with ethical problems (‘who do we work for?’) well ahead of the crisis of representation in mainstream anthropology. This is a particularly pressing problem when the object of study is emotionally and politically heavily charged, as is the case in the field of migration and migration bureaucracies. Consequently, it becomes difficult to disentangle a positioning of the researcher, interested in the emic views of actors, from those of the citizen with moral and political concerns. It is almost impossible to undertake organizational anthropology without being constantly challenged as to one’s political and ethical convictions. In fact, for many anthropologists, doing research on power-wielding bureaucracies is legitimate only if there is a disclaimer that the research is done from the position of *a priori* political critique (Karpiak and Garriott 2018; the term ‘power-wielding bureaucracies’ is borrowed from Heyman 2004). This obviously needs to be reflected on, including possible compensation strategies like becoming a moral and political prosecutor. This might stand in the way of the required analytical distance as much as the opposite position, which would be becoming a spokesperson for the organization under study.

The upside of these challenges is that the anthropology of bureaucracy has the potential to unsettle traditional distinctions between natives and researchers, emic and etic, inside and outside. Ethnographically studying bureaucrats is a particular form of 'studying sideways' (Hannerz 2006), partly also of studying up (Nader 1972). Thus, research on bureaucrats opens the way for a more symmetric anthropology wherein researcher and researched meet on a more equal footing, and it is not necessarily the anthropologist who is in command of a knowledge/power complex.

Paperwork and Documents

This book points to an emerging subfield in the anthropology of bureaucracy: an increasing interest in paperwork. This focus on materiality is, in fact, the result of interdisciplinary cross-fertilization, in this case with science and technology studies. Files are the essential infrastructure of any bureaucracy (Vismann 2008). They order the institution where they are produced; they link it to other institutions (including fragments of the state to other fragments; Andreetta, this volume); they control, or try to control, clients as well as, often forgotten, bureaucrats themselves (Lindberg and Borrelli; Vettters – both this volume). Anthropologists can be interested in their content, their form (Göpfert 2013) and what may be called their social life (Hull 2012). Most of all, however, anthropologists, like the contributors to this volume, are interested in documentary practices: how paperwork turns into documents; how these documents are produced; the work they do, e.g. creating legal categories (Berg, this volume); how they are being used (not always in the sense originally given to them by the producers; Cabot 2012); how they might be 'brokered'; and how they are being contested – mostly by the production of other documents (Nakueira, this volume). Paperwork can be contested only with paperwork, documents with other documents: this is the inevitability of bureaucracy which Weber had in mind, both in the public and the private sector (Hibou [2012] 2015). In the case of migration governance, this is done in 'complex multi-regulatory landscapes' with a multiplicity of sources of norms, layered systems of law and other regulations, often only loosely defined legal terms, rapidly changing legal contexts and weak representation of those who are governed (Gargiulo; Vettters – both this volume). However, while Weber ([1921] 1972: 562) insisted that bureaucracy was all the more efficient as it was 'dehumanised', anthropologists turn this perspective on its head and bring to the fore the social practices behind the production of 'dehumanised' documents, which often appear authorless or where the author is hidden in a collective (Berg, this volume).

When producing paperwork, bureaucrats collect, select and densify information. They select information according to their relevance

criteria – for example, criteria of suffering or deservedness – and in reference to specific purposes. Files and documents are drafted to create coherence between observations and their bureaucratic processing. In other words, it would be naive to assume such paperwork simply reflected reality; rather, it produces an (official) reality, in the process turning into documents and turning migrants and refugees into legal subjects (Berg, this volume). These documents serve as much to foster transparency as to avoid blame or responsibility for something or prevent oneself from experiencing negative, for example legal consequences (Lindberg and Borrelli, this volume). Furthermore, as our contributions show, paperwork is in most cases assembled, in case files, with particular audiences in mind – some of them direct, some indirect. In this sense, these audiences are co-authors. The same is true for the counter case files which migrants assemble to support their claims. This functionality of its production does not prevent paperwork, once established, from following trajectories of its own, being reframed, landing on the desks of people for whom it was not originally intended, sometimes being used against its original objective (Andreetta, this volume), or by way of contrast serving as ‘hostile witnesses’ (Nakueira, this volume) – that is, in fact weakening the claim for which it was presented.

The result of these documentary practices is not uniform. Some of the contributors to this book, inspired by Foucault if not Kafka, stress the resulting opacity and the illegibility effect of paperwork (Lindberg and Borrelli, this volume). The latter might be too strong a term, but in any case there is no doubt that the regulatory situation is particularly opaque for migrants (Gargiulo, this volume). On the other hand, documents also turn people into legal subjects, which is the base for potential contestation even if the playing field is skewed and the ‘power to complain’ (*Beschwerdemacht*: Feest and Blankenburg 1972) of migrants relatively low. Sophie Andreetta, in turn, shows in this volume how bureaucrats might try to exploit interstices and contradictions in the regulatory landscape for migrants and in fact against (parts of) the state, while Sophie Nakueira insists on the agency of migrants and their capacity to navigate these landscapes, if not always successfully. Larissa Veters, finally, shows that attempts at legal ordering by bureaucrats can also be the entry gate to at least indirectly increasing stakeholder participation, with migrant organizations and NGOs lobbying for greater transparency; or, inversely, lower bureaucratic levels might resist such ordering from above (Gargiulo, this volume). Therefore, taking this book as a whole, it seems to make sense to acknowledge the double face of bureaucracy as a form of domination and oppression as well as of protection and liberation, and all the ambivalences this dialectic entails.

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