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A Review of the Anthropological Literature on the Civil Service

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Abstract

This paper reviews anthropological literature on the topic of how and why civil services function as they do. The paper considers the formal and informal rules that structure bureaucratic practice, including the effects of institutional history or culture. The review examines how bureaucrats understand or experience their work, such as the rules that guide them; the clients, bosses, or employees with whom they interact; and their own actions. Finally, the review considers what methodological or ethical challenges are posed by the study of bureaucracies. The first section explores normative expectations of organizational practice and how they shape scholars' accounts of the nature of bureaucratic power. The second section focuses on bureaucratic decision making, scrutinizing how institutional goals manifest in specific practices. The third section considers how sociocultural structures bear on bureaucratic practice, including the question of how organizational history and culture might complicate efforts at institutional reform. The fourth section engages with questions of knowledge production, ignorance, and indeterminacy, reviewing recent literature that questions the presumed role of bureaucracies and states as producers of knowledge. The fifth section explores the conceptual and practical methodological challenges faced by field researchers at institutions, and points toward key areas for future research.

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Introduction

Scholarly literature on bureaucracies (institutions, complex organizations, and the civil service) is diverse across disciplines and over time. Fields such as organizational studies, public administration, sociology, political science, and anthropology have all contributed to our understanding of bureaucracies. Taken together, the body of work is massive. This review examines social science literature on bureaucracy primarily within anthropology, but including some work in related fields. The questions that orient it are those that orient the authors of those studies. Put in general terms, they are the following: What factors determine why bureaucracies work in the ways they do? Do bureaucrats determine institutional practice or are they controlled by institutional rules and regulations? How do the effects of bureaucracies relate to their stated aims? What factors other than formal rules and regulations (e.g., institutional history or culture) influence bureaucrats? How do bureaucrats understand or experience their work – the rules and reforms that guide them, the clients, bosses, or employees with whom they interact, and their own actions? What methodological or ethical challenges are posed by the study of bureaucracies?

These questions are addressed in this review across five different thematic sections. The first section, entitled "Ideal Types, Institutional Purpose, and the Fragmentary Nature of Bureaucratic Organizations," explores normative expectations of organizational practice and how this shapes scholars' accounts of the nature of bureaucratic power. Its aims are two-fold. First, it reviews scholarly discussion of the Weberian "ideal type" and their relationship to institutional goals; second, it examines those concerns against accounts of the coherence or fragmentation of people and administrative units within bureaucracies. The second section, entitled, "From Policy to Practice: The Significance of Discretion and Social Context for Organizational Success," carries forward the concern regarding institutional purpose and coherence from the first section to examine how institutional goals manifest in specific bureaucratic practices. Focused on bureaucratic decision-making, it considers the ways in which rules are understood and followed by bureaucrats, including the significance of discretion and the factors that influence its application. The third section, “The Culture of Organizations and the Culture of Reforms,” extends the discussion of how socio-cultural structures bear on bureaucratic practice by analyzing the relationship between organizational function and organizational culture. This topic relates to the question of how such a culture (whether “of” or “enveloping” the bureaucracy) might complicate efforts at institutional reform and how the history of institutions or nations shapes them in the present. The fourth section, entitled “The Nature of Bureaucratic Knowledge,” engages with questions of knowledge production, ignorance, and indeterminacy. It reviews recent literature in social sciences that questions the presumed role of bureaucracies and states as producers of knowledge, casting light on the importance of ignorance to institutional function. This literature has also recently explored the ways in which indeterminacy and ambiguity texture bureaucratic practices—in particular those at the “street level”—and how temporal and material conditions of institutional life can shape bureaucratic practice. The fifth section, “Methodological and Ethical Challenges to Studying Institutions,” explores the methodological challenges faced by field researchers at institutions, both conceptual and practical. Finally, the paper concludes by synthesizing these overarching themes and pointing toward key areas for future research.

Before turning to these themes, however, it would be useful to consider the intellectual trajectories that gave rise to the particular set of literatures under review here. Anthropology’s early and enduring interest in the exotic and non-Western has meant that anthropologists have been relatively quiet on the topic of bureaucracy when compared with sociologists and political scientists. A number of developments in the field are changing this of late, and the anthropology of bureaucracy is in a period of expansion and maturation (Heyman 2012). On the one hand, debates over the nature of the state have led anthropologists to call for an examination of the everyday practices of state functionaries (Bear and Mathur 2014; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2008; Gupta and Ferguson 2002; Hansen and Stepputat 2001; Heyman 1995, 2004; Trouillot 2003), rather than focus on narratives *about* the state from ordinary people (Das and Poole 2004; Gupta 1995; Taussig 1997) and those *produced by* the state (Mitchell 1999; Scott 1998), or to accept the "vulgar" Marxist notion that the state is merely a tool for maintaining relations of production.[1] The ascendancy of development and aid institutions as objects of anthropological concern has also encouraged anthropologists to make a similar transition, in this case from an examination of the institutional discourses that were found to obscure the political underpinnings of development aid and their effects in local communities (Escobar 1993; Ferguson 1990), to an examination of the everyday practices and self-representational work of the donor and recipient institutions themselves (Anders 2005; James 2015; Lea 2008; Li 2007; Mosse 2005; Rottenburg 2009). Third, the rise of "audit cultures" (Strathern 2000) in the neoliberal academy has prompted anthropologists to reflect critically on the institutional practices in which they themselves participate (Brenneis 1994, 1999; Lederman 2006). Finally, the analytical tools developed by philosophers and sociologists of science to examine knowledge production in the natural sciences (Callon 1986; Haraway 1989; Latour 1987; Latour and Woolgar 1979; Star and Griesemer 1989) have invigorated anthropologists' attention to the production of expertise and knowledge elsewhere (Carr 2010; Choy 2011; Mathews 2011),[2]

[1] Marx and Engels state in the Communist Manifesto that: "The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie" (1999 [1848]:5).
[2] Anthropologists' reflexive critique of their own discipline's knowledge production practices (e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986) is not unrelated to this development.

dovetailing with emergent interests in materiality, documents, and documentation (Hull 2012a, 2012b; Riles 2006) in ways that make institutions ideal research sites.

An emphasis throughout nearly all of literature is on the importance of attending to the everyday practices of institutions. This contrasts with the earliest anthropology of bureaucracy, such as by Michael Herzfeld (1992) and Don Handelman (1981), which was less interested in practices than in the overarching symbolic order that made bureaucracy "thinkable." The significance of this move is profound. As Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2009) puts it with respect to the state in Africa, for example, "It is easy to get the feeling that, for decades, journalists, politicians and many researchers, both Africans and Africanists, have been engaged in a relentless search for the 'essence' of the African state while neglecting to carry out a concrete analysis of administrations, public services, bureaucratic system and relations between civil servants and the users of state services" (2009:39). Taken together, these developments signal a general trend toward using anthropological methods of participant observation to understand how bureaucracies work; what concepts organize them materially, semiotically, and temporally; and what implications they have for the world around us.

Ideal Types, Institutional Purpose, and the Fragmentary Nature of Bureaucratic Organizations

This section traces a line through a set of conversations, beginning with Weber (1946), about the ideal qualities of bureaucracy and the lived reality of bureaucracies that are riven with conflict and heterogeneity, which fundamentally calls into question the notion that institutions have a coherence of purpose. How authors treat this countervailing movement—between a depiction of bureaucracies as defined by order and as defined by disorder—sheds light on their distinct understandings of bureaucratic power. Because of Max Weber's tremendous influence on the field still today, one cannot help but begin with his (1946) famous analysis of bureaucracy. Weber stated that bureaucracy was marked by rationalization of human action through clearly delineated hierarchy and protocols; thus organized, bureaucracy served as a dispassionate form of social organization able to carry out matters of the state. The growth of a class of bureaucrats, however, marked a distinct rupture in the social fabric: their regimentalization of matters of the state meant that they had ever-greater control over access to state resources. This "power position" of bureaucracy dooms citizens to life in an "iron cage," he said, as this class of bureaucrats comes to control more than even the sovereign. The ideal types of bureaucratic organization that Weber described set up paradoxes that later organizational theorists would seize upon as an extremely productive strawman (Hoag 2014): the more rules are enforced, the less they are followed (Gouldner 1954); rules set out to achieve goals become goals in themselves, and ultimately subvert those original goals (Merton 1936, 1968) or are executed by people with no knowledge of the context (Crozier 1964); "informal" bureaucratic norms turn out to be critical to achieving formal goals (Barnard 1938; Blau 1955; Selznick 1966), and so on.[3] Later generations of authors writing in anthropology showed how attempts to homogenize the practice of bureaucratic policy create more opportunities for heterogeneous interpretation (Sandvik 2011); how rules seem never specific enough to guide practice clearly for a local context (Scherz 2011); and how people known for their warmth and hospitality become cold automatons (Herzfeld 1992). These paradoxes convey the paradoxical place that bureaucracy occupies within Western discourse more broadly: orderly and

[3] Interestingly, like the Manchester School anthropologists writing against static, ahistorical structural functionalism in African social analysis (e.g., Gluckman, Epstein), the students of Robert K. Merton (e.g., Blau, Selznick, and Crozier) all looked to the dysfunctions, internal tensions, and cohesions of institutions as moments of organizational change. See Burawoy (1979), Perrow (1986), Heyman (2004), and Hull (2013) for helpful reviews of this and other work in organization studies.

important, and yet horrifically, comically absurd, a position perhaps captured most evocatively by Franz Kafka (1946, 1993, 1998).

This paradox has generated at least two distinct conceptions of bureaucracy's political effects. Some characterizations evince the Frankenstein-like quality of bureaucracies—creatures designed by reason but ultimately yielding something monstrous and out of control—as emblems of the perils and contradictions of modernity's obsession with classification and documentation. One might see Kafka's work in such a light, but also that of Bowker and Star (2005), who show how people's identities get "torqued" by the inflexible categories of medical diagnoses or South African Apartheid; of James (2015), who documents the unintended consequences of relief aid in Haiti based on typologies of trauma or need; or by McKay (2012), who shows how transnational interventions to introduce documentary measures aimed at improving public health led to a proliferation of paper as well as of diagnoses in a Mozambican clinic. Another current in the literature, which overlaps this one, emphasizes the ways that bureaucracy can depoliticize what are fundamentally political processes. An early and notable example is Hannah Arendt's (1977) famous analysis of former Nazi officers on trial at the Nuremberg Trials, which explained that bureaucracy generates "rule by nobody" through the physical and cognitive separation of decision-makers from those they decide upon. Others, writing often from a Foucauldian perspective, show how the discourses and bureaucratic practices of development (Ferguson 1990), refugee assistance (Sandvik 2011), child protection services (Scherz 2011), child welfare and poverty alleviation (Gupta 2012), and others convert political questions into technical ones. In these cases, authors have tended to find that bureaucracies ultimately reinforce the existing political order, even though bureaucrats and clients might assert themselves at some level (see also Telesca 2015), a tacit—if only partial—affirmation of Weber's "iron cage."

Thus, Weber's work is both illuminating in itself, but also a key reference point for questioning how institutions work. His description represents the prevailing normative view of bureaucracy. Though much can be learned by *refuting* normative ideal types, an additional goal should be to break free of its cognitive framing and *refuse* it outright. To this end, we might pose a fundamental question: What is the purpose of an institution? A key assumption about bureaucracies is that they are supposed to work (Hoag 2011)—that they generate order from chaos (Lea 2012). This shapes the way bureaucracies are conceived of by scholars, prompting them to see bureaucrats as interesting only for the extent to which they either do or do not obey rules—and why. For example, while bureaucrats might be said to "provide services" and researchers might seek to explore whether or how they do so, bureaucrats themselves might envision their workday as a series of tasks or a logging of hours (Anders 2010). While institutions are indeed charged with carrying out tasks, they are also a life-world populated by actual buildings, specific objects and people with anxieties and dreams. Indeed, a similar point can be made even for entire ministries. While one might accept at face value that a ministry exists to "carry out its charge," we might also know that its true genesis lies in a patronage network (Bayart et al. 1999). In some impoverished countries, it could be argued that bureaucracies "work" when they are merely a form of public employment.[4] The acceptance of institutions' self-presentation is not only a legacy of Weber's (1946) work, but also of the success of that self-presentation: the formalities, the rules, the forms, the signage, the uniforms—all of these communicate the coherence of institutional purpose and legitimacy (Mitchell 1999; Sharma and Gupta 2006; Riles 2000; cf. Hull 2012b:26). The point here is two-fold: the nature and locus of bureaucratic power appears differently depending on

[4] One might also note here the structural functionalist literature exploring what Robert Merton (1968) called the "manifest" and "latent" functions of social institutions (e.g., Blau 1955). All bureaucracies and bureaucratic practices can be said to have both stated purposes and *de facto* purposes.

whether one takes a normative or non-normative view; and holding normativity at bay even just for a moment is important to seeing the lived world of a bureaucracy.

In addition to this point about the normativity of ideal types, a second theme can be drawn out of the literature from anthropology: that of the fragmentary nature of institutions. A common theme in recent anthropology of bureaucracy is that government, development, and other institutions are heterogeneous rather than monolithic, riven with conflict and instability, and staffed by people who vary by more than simply their hierarchical position (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Blundo 2014; Herzfeld 2005; Hull 2012b; Mathews 2011; Mosse 2005; Li 2007; Robbins 2000; Willott 2014; see also Warner and Low 1976; cf. Scott 1998). Indeed, while the public might envision a totality, bureaucrats themselves might experience instead a set of fragmented units, social groups, or even floors of a building (Vike 2012). This insight emerges in anthropology partly from the influential work on the state, which challenged the notion that the state is "a thing" and instead proposed that it is merely an idea—an effect of discourses and practices—and therefore has no singular purpose (Mitchell 1999; Abrams 1988). Ethnographic treatments of bureaucratic practice have partially affirmed this perspective, demonstrating the contingency, partiality, and materiality of bureaucratic knowledge (e.g., Dery 1998; Hoag 2010; Hull 2012b; Mathews 2011; Mosse 2005).

These insights may be somewhat biased, however: the bulk of deep ethnography of institutions has focused on street-level, service-oriented bureaucracies to the neglect of mid- and upper-level officials. One reason for this is that street-level workers are the functionaries of the state with whom conventional anthropological subjects (i.e., the subaltern) most commonly engage. Understanding the social worlds of such bureaucrats therefore helps anthropologists to make sense of existing anthropological studies on the ways that the state impacts "everyday people." Less attention has been given to middle- and upper-level workers. This may be changing with the recognition that, for institutions to control society at large, they must first control the people *within* them (Chalfin 2010; Anders 2010), a point that underscores the potential importance of investigating hierarchically higher perspectives. Some work has been done to this end. Tess Lea (2008) finds that mid-level health professionals in Northern Australia see it as their duty and responsibility to help the Aboriginal people to whom they provide services, Their middle-class, bleeding-heart liberalism, she shows, even compels them to promote rhetoric about those communities which they know to be untrue in order to advance their efforts to "help" (also see Ferguson 1990). Another examination of middle management in the anthropological research is that of Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan's (2009) work on the civil service in Niger.[5] While inquiring into the origins and effects of corruption in interviews with heads of department, he finds a "culture of impunity." The heads of department felt unable to discipline employees in their charge for fear of retaliation. They explained that employees who were well connected, whether through political party affiliation or otherwise, might protest the discipline and the department head could be given the common punishment of being re-assigned to another, less desirable post. Because people have a "hold over each other," he says, both vertically and horizontally, few see an interest in asserting themselves. In effect, low-level employees have found ways to level the hierarchy, and this has serious negative implications for institutional function.

[5] Olivier de Sardan is founder and head of the LASDEL institute in Niamey, Niger, which has supported a very important body of ethnographic work on the state in Africa (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2008; Blundo and Le Meur 2009; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014).

From Policy to Practice: The Significance of Discretion and Social Context for Organizational Success

The macro-scale themes described in the previous section surrounding power, hierarchy, and the coherence of bureaucracies, come alive in a specific, micro-scale theme that has been a staple of bureaucracy studies and which is covered in this section: discretion. Understandably, much social science of institutions has been concerned with the question of whether the practices of bureaucrats follow the stated policies of the bureaucracy and, if not, why that is so. This is what Hoag (2011, 2014) has called "the policy-practice problematic." It has been particularly salient in service delivery contexts, where scholars have sought to understand how bureaucrats' emotions or biases impact the application of policy (Graham 2002; Fulgerud 2004).[6] On the one hand, Marxist approaches have found that class interests manifest themselves in the dissemination and understanding of official policy through the cultivation of bureaucratic worldviews that serve superordinate powers (Heyman 1995), while authors drawing on culturalist and cognitivist frameworks find that bureaucratic logics of classification and insider-outside taxonomies facilitate indifference or power-laden discretion on the part of bureaucrats (Handelman 1981; Herzfeld 1992), if sometimes haphazardly (Gilboy 1991).

As Hull (2012a, 2012b) has pointed out, anthropology historically made its way into organizational studies through scholars who believed it could help to explain "informal" processes that might dictate the operation of organizations somewhat outside the purview of formal rules (Baba 2009; Warner and Low 1976; see also Garsten and Nyqvist 2013). This notion was further developed by sociologists such as Peter Blau, who stated that "informal organizations" (i.e., bureaucratic practices and cultures that fall outside of the "formal" organizational structure) are

[6] This, of course, assumes that bureaucrats know the laws they are supposed to carry out (Hunter et al. 2016).

equally a part of the "formal organization": whether they "exactly follow official rules or directly violate them, they are part of the bureaucratic organization" (Blau 1955: 2-3).[7]

At the heart of this question regarding discrepancy between policies and practices is the concept of discretion: the leeway provided to bureaucrats to interpret how and when to apply a rule. Given that Lipsky (1981) and others (e.g., Blau 1955; Scherz 2011) have shown how discretion is not a betrayal of the universal rule but rather a necessary artifact of bureaucratic practice, we can affirm that discretion is not in a zero-sum relationship with rules (Satzewich 2015). More rules can in fact engender what Jane Guyer (2005) has called a "coral reef of formalities" in her writing on how people in Nigeria navigate the rules of financial transactions to find value. That is, because rules can never be specific enough to account for the myriad possibilities of context (Hoag 2011), additional rules can have the opposite of their intended effect, proliferating the types of practices that can be deemed legitimate interpretations of the rule (McKay 2012; Sandvik 2011). Paradoxically, bureaucrats require discretion in order to follow the rules because the rigidly executed rule could very possibly be "wrong" (i.e., not in the spirit of the law) in certain contexts. Managers are keenly aware of this (Satzewich 2015). Such a phenomenon is captured well by John (2014), who explores "the difference between the aim of the public servant and the aims of the public" in cases of Freedom of Information (FoI) requests in Scotland. There, the professional demands of bureaucrats can come into conflict with the stated goals of their institution (see also Nyqvist 2013, 2015), and bureaucrats go to great pains to weigh the benefit of access and transparency with the benefits of the state. Blundo (2014) and Hamani (2014) also demonstrate how informal and improvisational practices of bureaucrats in Senegal and Niger,

[7] The notion is complicated, however, by those who point out the importance of repetitive rule-following (or, "proceduralism," as Sharma and Gupta (2006) phrase it) is central to the performance of institutional power.

respectively, enable them and their institutions to navigate competing demands from factions of the state or society.

The question that flows from this insight about discretion concerns whether the "personal" interests or biases of bureaucrats intervene upon bureaucratic decisions. After all, bureaucracies are embedded within a cultural, political, and economic context. They are not hermetically sealed off from society (Warner and Low 1976; see also Baba 2009). In scholarly and lay conversation, the figure of the bureaucrat can sometimes overwhelm the ethnographic reality of bureaucrats' individual practices and identities of others. Like scientists, they are expected to carry out their charge with objectivity and political neutrality (Hoag 2011). But it should be no surprise that bureaucrats have emotions (Graham 2002; Fuglerud 2004) and moral quandaries about who should get in (Gilboy 1991). Indeed, restating this risks a re-inscription of the ideals of bureaucratic dispassion. In sum, bureaucrats are people (Lea 2008) and beyond revealing the inadequacy of their stereotypes, we should accept it as a basic premise. Bureaucrats themselves are members of that society: they are mothers and brothers and football players (Anders 2010), and they might move throughout their day from quintessentially "bureaucratic" tasks, such as filling a form, to "non-bureaucratic" ones, such as driving to the field or heading to lunch. Consider the "young professionals" described by Mathur (2014) who are part-time employees officially hired by NGOs to which government work has been outsourced. They wear knock-off brand clothing to work and do not fit the mold of "civil servant" either in appearance or even contractually.

Three important volumes from an African context are helpful in this regard, shedding light on the everyday practices of civil servants, the reappropriations, transformations, and enduring legacies of colonial civil services, and the question of corruption (Blundo and Olivier de Sardan 2006; Blundo and Le Meur 2009; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014). The contributors to

Blundo and Olivier de Sardan (2006) focus specifically on corruption. They seek to complicate a normative view of corruption, partly in response to long-standing and controversial narratives about (neo-)patrimonialism in the African state (Medard 1982; Olivier de Sardan 2014), showing how corrupt practices can be networked into the social practices of the institution and society at large rather than merely aberrant violation of a specific legal code. They show that networks of patronage insinuate the state, and that the everyday sociality of the civil service can *compel* people to take bribes for fear of being seen as a threat to others in the institution. A strong moral obligation to share one's resources with kin, as found in some places in Africa, can also compel bureaucrats to use their connections to assist others (Anders 2010). Even if one dislikes the "slippery slope" of seeing corruption for anything less than illegal, the authors make a strong case that a normative assumption about legality can obscure our view of what actually happens within institutions. The work also suggests the importance of exploring local conceptions of "institutional success," "failure," and "corruption" when attempting to discern why an institution departs from expected or desired practice. Along similar lines, the contributors to Blundo and Le Meur (2009) explore "good governance" by examining what the concept means in specific contexts. That is, rather than assess whether an institution works, they assess *how* an institution works: when clients are deemed to legitimately deserve services, how norms and rules for the workplace are established or reformed, and how services are concretely rendered. Gerhard Anders (2009), for example, shows how bureaucrats in the Malawian civil service navigate a complex field of rules and obligations (e.g., from kin, supervisors, and fellow bureaucrats) in assessing whether an act constitutes "corruption", switching continuously from one normative register to another. David Mosse's study of development praxis in India (2005), however, shows that the question of whether practices conform to policies could be backward. The development practitioners featured in his book mostly labor to produce *interpretations* of policy in reports that justify their practices *ex post facto*, fitting them into fashionable development rubrics, such as "participatory development."

The Culture of Organizations and the Culture of Reforms

Inquiry into the culture of organizations has often been linked to an interest in understanding organizational change and, in particular, why organizations might be resistant to reforms due to conservative aspects of organizational culture. This section follows this thread through the literature: How do organizations change? What do we know about how efforts to reform institutions fare, and how those reforms are understood or received by bureaucrats at various levels of the hierarchy? How have reforms associated with neoliberalism (i.e., increased privatization of previously public responsibilities, reductions in budgets and consolidation of posts) affected the civil service in the developing world, and what factors shape how they have been received? What do we know about how various management paradigms (e.g., New Public Management) have shaped the operation of bureaucracies?

A first point worth making is that the interest among students of organizational culture to understand how "organizational culture" might complicate reform efforts implies that culture is by definition conservative and that an organization has only one culture. While it can be used as a short-hand term for the general habits of people at a bureaucracy, it should be noted that, for anthropologists, culture is dynamic, contested, and multiple. Some studies that have sought to discern links between national culture and institutional forms have risked a kind of broad-brush culturalism (Bayart 2009; Bayart et al. 1999; Chabal and Daloz 1999). A second point is that reforms themselves are cultural—that is, they entail norms, ways of speaking and interpreting, and a politics. For example, Peter Fleming (2013) shows that a push to encourage employees to "be themselves" at work is more than a mundane slogan or a corrective for earlier managerial approaches that promote overly rigid, Weberian, rational-bureaucratic modes. Such a push to embrace the "person" of the bureaucrat engages in a particular managerial ideology—a historically specific corporate culture. Offered as an "opportunity to display real selves ('warts and all') in the realm of work as a moment of freedom" (2013:69), Fleming concludes this may be (or be perceived as) simply a way to blur the work-life distinction.

Thirdly, the notion that a reform flounders because of resistant organizational culture also presumes that a given reform makes sense. Often initiated by the very upper echelons of the civil service—political appointees who come and go with the political winds (Segatti et al. 2014)—or by outsiders (regional governance bodies, foreign lenders), reforms can lack the local knowledge that would make them tractable.[8] Ignorant of local context or "supply-driven," they might be doomed from the beginning (Moshonas 2014). "Culture-thwarted" reforms also imply that bureaucrats are conscious of the reform's existence. In some cases, a civil servant might not even be aware that reforms are in progress, particularly in institutions that have a history of repeated reforms (Segatti et al. 2014). Consider this passage by Anders (2010:7):

> From the perspective of individual civil servants, the civil service reform did not constitute a grand and comprehensive plan but only one aspect of their daily lives, experienced as mundane practices, such as getting one's pay-check, securing a salary advance or leaving work early to take care of private business.

In the end, what analyses of organizational culture might be after is an understanding of the ways that history configures how bureaucrats act in the present. Vike's (2013) analysis of a municipal social welfare office in Norway shows that the social democratic optimism of the 1950s

[8] In interesting counterpoint, Ilana Feldman (2010) shows that the day-to-day work of administration can be largely cut off from broader changes. In the case she examines, Palestinian civil servants endure through dramatic socio-political upheavals simply by attending to the mundane practices of their work, which ultimately provides a stable foundation for the maintenance of organizational function over time.

in that country was institutionalized in the professional identity and organizational autonomy of social workers, a legacy that carried through to the present even as it was subdued by an emphasis on a new set of efficiency-oriented managerial ideals in the 1990s. Egalitarian ideals enshrined in a strong municipal system upon which the central government came to rely for controlling the costs of delivered services meant that managerial reforms emanating from the central government were difficult to implement. In an even more material sense, Deborah Posel (2000) has shown the legacy of history on the South African civil service through its transition from Apartheid. Under Apartheid, the civil service was largely used as a tool benefitting whites from rural areas, but at the transition this situation changed. Huge numbers of white civil servants were retrenched or offered early retirement to make way for previously disenfranchised groups. But because whites had held positions of privilege within the system for so long, they also had the majority of the administrative skills, meaning that many management posts still today are filled by white acting appointments until suitable non-white candidates can be found or developed.[9]

Olivier de Sardan (2009) puts forward a theory of African bureaucracy by examining its historical construction during the colonial and postcolonial period, contrasted with the rise of bureaucratic states in Europe. He points out that, whereas the figure of the bureaucrat in Europe is one who applies a rule with excessive rigidity, in Africa the bureaucrat is more often seen as capricious and abusive. This, he says, is a product of a specific colonial trajectory. State bureaucracies in Europe came into being with the advent of principles of citizenship and democracy, whereas in colonial Africa they developed alongside the despotism and violence of colonial rule. Colonial state administration was transferred to African civil servants, often those

[9] Similarly, in Lesotho (Khaketla 1971), Malawi (Anders 2010), and elsewhere, the civil service has been a key tool for political patronage and job creation in the postcolonial period, partly explaining why reforms ushered in by Bretton Woods institutions were seen as such a threat to some civil servants.

who had previously worked within these despotic administrations and they carried forward the capriciousness and abusiveness. In counterpoint, however, Hull (2012b) points out that the "haunting" of the postcolonial present by the colonial past might at times be overstated. Certainly, at the Capital Development Agency in Islamabad, Pakistan where he conducted field research, the continuities of colonial administration were overshadowed by the many innovations made during the postcolonial period, necessitated by new contradictions and demands specific to the time.

A central object of critique in development studies since the 1990s has been Structural Adjustment programs, which have been accused of undermining state capacity. Ayee (2001), for example, shows that a Civil Service Performance Improvement Program in Ghana from 1995 aimed to improve efficiency and service delivery through restructuring, but manifest primarily in salary restructuring and retrenchments. More recent work in anthropology has sought to complicate this "easy" narrative of neoliberal process. A special issue of *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* by Bear and Mathur (2014), for example, sets out to "redefine the public good," seeking to harness the power of that concept supposedly at the heart of the civil service for a just end rather than rule out state bureaucracies as merely tools for the powerful. They contend that a set of concepts, such as "transparency" and "human rights" have ensnared ordinary people around the world in bureaucratic practices and have rendered invisible the bureaucracies' ethical positions. Their overarching conclusion is that the neoliberal reforms which accompany those concepts do not simply make bureaucracies more or less effective, but rather "generat[e] new kinds of intimate relations with the state" (Bear and Mathur 2014: 22). For example, Qureshi (2014) found that the marketization of an HIV/AIDS health program in Pakistan led the Ministry of Health officials into uneasy arrangements with outside NGOs, turning their attention to learning how to manage contracts with these NGOs rather than educate their own employees to carry out the needed tasks.

In short, rather than straightforwardly serving a single political agenda, neoliberal reforms first and foremost generate new social networks that we know little about.

The Nature of Bureaucratic Knowledge

While bureaucracies are sometimes portrayed as consummate producers of knowledge, generating data on the minutiae of their subjects and enabling state surveillance (Foucault 1978; Scott 1998), the nature of that knowledge has only recently come under serious scrutiny. This section reviews two aspects of this question: what bureaucrats and states know of their subjects and how that knowledge is produced or embodied.

As already noted above, institutions are fragmented: bureaucrats do not know everything their superiors know and vice versa. The production of knowledge about their subjects—whether people or things—is similarly open-ended. The anthropological literature on bureaucracy building off Lipsky (1981) has shown that bureaucrats "streamline" decision-making to render persons legible, drawing on templates or stereotypes that enable them to make difficult choices; clients, we learn, play upon, undermine, or attempt to "fit" within these stereotypes (Cabot 2014; Silver 2010; Ticktin 2006). Bureaucrats' perceptions of the world are shaped by previous histories of encounter as well as the structure or conditions of their work. Officials have a more mature or entrenched set of expectations to graft upon the encounter, having had repeated interaction with subjects in a single context. This is exemplified by the systems of meaning that they develop to manage the indeterminacy of that context (Heyman 1995, Hoag 2010), determining a course of action based on a routinized assessment of the subject (Gilboy 1990; Smith 2016). Satzewich's (2015:79) study of immigration officials in Canada quotes one visa officer as saying, "I don't agonize over decisions… If you agonize over decisions, this is not the right job for you." The quote illustrates the conditions under which bureaucratic decisions are made: bureaucrats work under time and other constraints and, even in relatively consequential roles such as immigration, where a visa given or denied could have serious ramifications for the client. One manager interviewed at the same office suggested that the worst kind of visa officer was one who could not make a decision.

Bureaucrats also seek to protect their organizations from public they might see as threatening (Hoag 2010)—or, indeed, to promote the well-being of those they are charged with helping (Lea 2008)—and that bureaucrats can take seriously the notion that they bear the responsibility of executing the law (Alpes and Spire 2013). While bureaucrats might close epistemic gaps through routinized practices, surely other gaps emerge when the contradictions of their decision-making formula begin to surface. Anthropologists would therefore be wise not to presume that bureaucrats are robotic—not only do they risk drawing on stereotyped notions of bureaucrats, but they foreclose important ethnographic ground. Moreover, deciding by a formula does not mean that there is only one formula, nor does it mean that formulae and their origins are uninteresting (Hoag 2010; Cabot 2012).

According to modernist depictions of the state as a mechanism for the production of a legible populace, knowledge is uncovered and leveraged for the purposes of control (Scott 1998).[10] Bureaucracy, in such a framing, is the quintessential enterprise for the production of these statistics. In light of the critique of these monolithic images of the state and organizations generally, recent work has begun to uncover the roles that ignorance, ambiguity, and indeterminacy play in shaping bureaucratic practice (Best 2012; Hoag 2014; James 2015; Mathews 2011), as well as the way in which state knowledge might be co-produced (Jasanoff 2004) through

[10] As I have pointed out elsewhere, bureaucratic practice resembles scientific practice (Hoag 2011) and it is therefore no coincidence that the "modest witness" (Shapin and Schaeffer 1985; Haraway 1997) resembles Weber's dispassionate bureaucrat. Efforts to show the ways in which bureaucracies are embroiled with broader social processes can therefore draw flame from authors in science and technology studies (Longino 1990; Daston 2009).

the negotiated interactions of bureaucrats, publics, technology, and powerful political actors (Hetherington 2012; Hull 2012b). Andrew Mathews' (2011; see also Dery 1998) work on Mexican state forestry programs shows how state knowledge and power is predicated, paradoxically, on the production of ignorance—knowing what not to know or say. Thedvall (2012) similarly concludes that it is by withholding and strategically concealing the political content of meetings that bureaucrats are able to achieve goals in the crafting of EU policy from various national member states' interests. In addition, Don Brenneis (2009) has shown how the "objectivity" necessary to "following the rule" is not necessarily pre-ordained but rather is worked out in practice by a community of bureaucrats (and possibly others) who together develop acceptable modes of impartiality to guide their work (see also Hull 2012b on the production of collective agency in spite of the individualizing tendencies of the stamps and signatures that mark files).

A related point here has to do with anticipation, or orientation toward the future. Despite the importance of time to the structuring of bureaucratic worlds, it has been given scant attention in the literature on bureaucracy, except as simply a resource that nefarious bureaucrats can capture (Sellerberg 2008; Smart and Smart 2006; Verdery 1996). What are the origins of bureaucracies' particular temporal regimes? On the one hand, waiting and delays are the inevitable outcomes of the forms of distributed responsibility inherent in hierarchical organizations. Because authority is parceled out among various positions within the hierarchy, the greater part of individuals within the organization – that is, those at lower levels – do not possess the authority to sign off on all of the tasks they may be presented with (Hull 2012b). Waiting is also potentially the result of local cultures or practices within bureaucracies – that is, both the laziness commonly accorded bureaucrats and the deliberate obstruction put to self-serving ends, such as the solicitation of bribes. Delay can have to do with what Robert K. Merton (1968) called "goal displacement," the application of rules for their own sake, without overarching goals in mind. There are many possibilities that should be better understood. But, as noted above, much of bureaucracy studies has been focused on the practice—the action. If we were to reorient ourselves according to a different assumption—that the bulk of bureaucratic time is comprised of waits and not of actions—what might we see?

Finally, bureaucratic work is structured materially – not simply by the resources available in the Marxian sense of materiality—but in the more immediate and mundane sense. Hull's work is critical here. Focused on files and other "graphic artifacts," he shows the importance of looking *at* the documents that populate bureaucracies rather than looking *through* them (see Kafka 2009). That is, anthropologists have tended to use documents only as discursive, reading the content with their critical interpretive faculties, but they have seldom stopped to consider what their material form might say about that content or about bureaucratic practice at large (but see Marie-Jacob 2007). Richard Harper's (1998) book, as well as work in the sociology of science (Latour 2005, 1998) are significant exceptions. Tracing the "careers" of documents, as he explains it and as Hull (2012b) shows in great detail, can shed light on hierarchy, bureaucratic processes, bureaucrats' ideas about the importance of specific practices. As Hull (2012b) points out, so much of bureaucratic practice is inscribed upon paper that, "if you want to understand bureaucratic activities, follow the paper" (2012b:22). Harper describes how the transformation of documents from one form to another has significant implications for how it is understood or whether it is even read by people at various positions within the organization.

Methodological and Ethical Challenges to Studying Institutions

The trend toward increased attention to everyday bureaucratic practices could be taken as a delayed response to Laura Nader's (1972) famous injunction to anthropologists to "study up." Nader criticized anthropologists' neglect to study the "culture of the power" in favor of the culture of powerless—peasants, workers, etc.—and suggested that an anthropology of the powerful would challenge colonial tendencies within the discipline. The functionaries of bureaucratic institutions, however, are not necessarily or straightforwardly "up" (Hoag 2011). While they might occupy positions of power by virtue of having discretionary authority, the ability to delay, or privileged knowledge about the bureaucratic process, they are certainly subject to limits. Moreover, they might be poor or working class (Moshonas 2014); they might be from a racial minority; they might be women—in sum, the directionality of "studying up" is not always clear. Instead, it would be better said that anthropologists of bureaucracy study "sideways" or "obliquely" (Garsten and Nyqvist 2014; Hannerz 2006).

At any rate, this position still poses challenges to anthropological methods of observation. Garsten and Nyqvist's (2013) volume treats many of these issues of method and ethics in great detail. A first point worth noting is the strange fact that anthropological practice often shares certain qualities of organizational practice (also see Riles 2006, 2000; Strathern 2006; Brenneis 2006; Hull 2012a, 2012b). George Marcus and Douglas Holmes (Holmes 2012; Holmes and Marcus 2005; Deeb and Marcus 2011) have proposed a research methodology that embraces this analytical similarity and attempts to draw upon it by setting up "para-sites"—research settings that resemble academic spaces and can enable a collaborative process of knowledge making familiar to both anthropologist and informant. While Deeb and Marcus point to some of the limits of this method for studying the highest echelons of institutions, as their key informant-cum-collaborator foreclosed certain avenues of thought based on his own perspectives as to what anthropology was about. But it could still hold promise for mid-level employees.

Other, more practical methodological issues can arise, as well. One concerns the boundaries of the organization. As noted above, institutions should be seen as part of a larger social context. Should research activities take place strictly within the confines of the work day, or do researchers also seek to understand the lives of workers outside those confines?

Methodological issues intersect with ethical issues raised by studying bureaucracies, particularly around questions of access. When access is granted, employees at lower levels in the hierarchy might understand the terms of access differently from the supervisor, or might perceive that the supervisor has "commanded" the employee to disclose information. Informing potential informants of the terms of research will be important, so that people who fear for their jobs do not feel pressured in one way or another. This is a methodological issue as much as it is an ethical one, given the ways this granting of access might shape the nature of information given. A second issue has to do with the fact that research will be taking place during working hours – that is, research activities might impinge upon the ability of an employee to get his-her work done. These issues are particularly important at organizations that are under review or under the threat of cuts. Employees might be familiar with "consultants" from evaluation companies reviewing the activities, productivity, and organization of the bureaucracy. Employees might perceive a scholarly researcher as serving such a downsizing agenda and therefore distrust them or tailor answers to avoid being sacked. That is, researchers' aims might be misunderstood and information given that does not advance the aims of the research.

Finally, anthropologists can also find themselves roped into the work of the organization under study (Jensen 2013). As with most fieldsites, anthropologists are often seen as experts on the topic they are studying. This means that anthropologists of the civil service should be prepared to navigate that issue, which has a bearing on rapport. An outright rejection to provide one's opinion can have negative consequences on the research, with informants seeing the anthropologist as overly secretive. While this is true in all research contexts, lender-funded researchers in complex organizations must be particularly aware of its implications. Approaches to these issues will surely vary by the type of organization, but should be thought through beforehand.

Conclusion and Areas for Future Research

The anthropology of bureaucracy is undergoing a period of expansion and maturation, opening up new domains of research. Whereas previous work on the state and civil service was focused either on the symbolic foundations of bureaucracy or the ways that the state was perceived and discussed by everyday people, the last decade has seen a shift toward understanding how functionaries of the state perceive and go about their everyday work. Despite the fact that "bureaucracy" and the civil service have not been key topics for anthropologists until recently, the foregoing review demonstrates the diversity of approaches and findings. Concern with the Weberian "ideal type" and its failed realization in practice drew attention to the fragmentation of states and institutions, calling into question the coherence of purpose that was assumed by earlier anthropologies of the state, while at the same time illuminating diverging perspectives on the nature of bureaucratic power. This normative appraisal of whether bureaucratic practices conform to policies endured, however, partly because the concept of "discretion" served as fertile ground for anthropologists attuned to the ways that culture and society shape how humans interpret what is right or wrong, and partly because of enduring interest in the ways that informal practices make formal policies workable. These social and cultural forces figured prominently in discussions about institutional reform, which have figured culture to mean "resistance to change" while failing to account for the cultural aspects of reforms themselves. A new avenue of research has focused on the nature of bureaucratic knowledge, refusing to take for granted that institutions are merely engines for surveillance and seeking to describe how indeterminacy, ignorance, and the materiality of institutional knowledge configure state practices. Finally, methodological and ethical challenges presented by the anthropology of bureaucracy continue to be discussed and debated.

There are five key gaps in the literature that demand more research. First, more work is needed on the significance of various bureaucratic forms. Hull (2012b), for example, has demonstrated how files, maps, and other documents or documentary practices shed light on aspects of bureaucratic power and process. This has opened up entirely new territory, compelling anthropologists to explore these phenomena in other contexts or via other materials, including databases and other digital platforms. This point applies to other kinds of social forms as well, such as meetings (Schwartzman 1987; Telesca 2015; Thedvall 2012). With its cultural conventions surrounding space, temporality, and hierarchy, the meeting is fertile ground for anthropologists.

A second point, related to the first, regards the spatial and temporal forms of institutions. As noted above, time is critical to bureaucratic process—both with regard to the sequencing of protocols ("within 30 days, you must submit…") and delays—and yet neglected as an object of inquiry. The production of bureaucratic space, too, has gone relatively unexplored. What kinds of hierarchy are embedded in the spatial layout of offices? How do bureaucrats relate the movement of orders and rules to their institution's organogram? What about when they originate from outside the organization?

Third, more comparative work is needed to assess how standard concepts or practices travel across local or cultural contexts, such as Blundo and Le Meur's (2009) examination of "good governance." If concepts are received differently, what is the reason behind that difference?

Fourth, more work should be done to understand the career trajectories of individual bureaucrats, including their professional lives before, during and after their time within a particular public organization. Do patterns in these trajectories exist? If so, in what ways do they shape bureaucratic operations?

Finally, cross-hierarchy studies are few. As noted above, anthropologists have mostly focused on street-level, service-provision bureaucrats—a small subset of bureaucratic workers in the civil service, which could also include accountants, cleaners, interns, and others in mid- and upper-level positions. While this review has presented studies focused on middle management, they are few in number. Even fewer are analyses that take a holistic view of bureaucratic processes and work across specific "levels" of the organization. Given the fragmentary nature of institutions described above, this is critical work: How do institutions carry on without falling apart completely?

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Bureaucracy Lab | Literature Review of Anthropological Literature on Bureaucracy

A product of the Strengthening Research on the Civil Service Initiative

This literature review aims to describe the anthropological literature on the civil service. It was put together by academic anthropologists under the auspices of the Strengthening Research in the Civil Service initiative (SRCS). The SRCS aims to develop the evidence base for public sector reform by understanding the characteristics of public officials and the systems and organizations in which they work. The project will develop improved methods of data collection and analysis on the civil service, based on a complementary set of quantitative and qualitative approaches. The Bureaucracy Lab is an initiative of the World Bank to bring together its work on the design and operation of public sector organizations.

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