

INTERVIEWS

Interview with Matthew Hull: “It’s All about Real Bureaucracy, Control, and Stability”



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Matthew Hull, associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, was interviewed as an author of his recognized book “Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan” [Hull 2012] by Elena Gudova, PhD student and teacher at Higher School of Economics.

Abstract

Matthew Hull, associate professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Michigan, was interviewed as an author of his recognized book titled *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (2012) by Elena Gudova, PhD student and teacher at the Higher School of Economics.

Matthew Hull discusses the material practices concerning document production and circulation among government employees at the Capital Development Authority (CDA) of Islamabad. According to Prof. Hull, intense documentation is not necessarily a feature of state bureaucracy alone; rather, it is also relevant to the managerial and accountability activities of private corporations. Still, paperwork at government organizations provides a good empirical example of “governmentality practices.”

Apart from their ability to organize things by the power of a word, documents serve as mediators in the relationships among people, objects, and institutions. Storytelling practices may shed some light on the performance of specific files and regulations, which can form physical social order and provide access to different areas of responsibility and sources of power. In that sense, the “virtualization” of documents and their break from materiality does not necessarily reduce the level of bureaucracy; instead, it can create new dimensions of symbolic inequality among bureaucrats and their clients.

According to Hull, the power of bureaucracy (both official and nonofficial) varies cross-culturally and even across companies in the same country. Despite their common British postcolonial legacy, India and Pakistan may serve as good examples of this. The idea of accountability lies at the core of bureaucracy and sets the ground for the emergence of a political economy of paper. Above all, this interpenetration of documents and goods and services production may characterize both capitalistic and noncapitalistic societies.

Keywords: bureaucracy; materiality; documents; accountability; ethnography of the state; governmentality practices.

— **First of all, could you just tell a little bit about yourself, your background and how you decided to complete this complicated research in Pakistan?**

— I guess, there are two questions you have, to that one of you “Why Pakistan and South Asia?” and “why study documents?” I don’t think that one would interest your readers very much. I wanted to take a year away from my undergraduate university studies. As someone from a rural area, I wanted to see the

world, particularly cities. I decided to go to India and was awarded a grant from the Rotary Club,¹ an American civic organization that, among many things, funds study abroad to develop international understanding and goodwill. I went to India and spent a year there doing language studies. That got me interested in South Asia and languages. Most Americans are decidedly monolingual and poorly educated in languages—and I was one of them. All these fascinating languages in South Asia just amazed me, with people were speaking three or four languages at the same time with different people for different purposes, like humor. These things really amazed me.

So, later for a PhD project, I decided I wanted to do something in the areas of languages and cities. I started casting around for projects and ended up finding out that Islamabad was a planned city. So, imagine, this was a time when anthropologists had just started working on cities and formal planning bureaucracies. I got interested and started looking at the urban planning and architecture, but the key questions for me, as a linguistic anthropologist, focused on language. What I was going to do was not focus purely on conversation and speech, but look at how language relates to the world and how planning discourses and ways we can talk about space are central to how we experience or at least represent space. Basically, I was interested in the use of deictics, words that anchor us in space and time. English examples are “here” and “now” and “there” and “then.” I planned to begin with those basic parts of language and move all the way up to the master plans and things like that. I wanted to see how one could do a linguistic study of the city.

Unfortunately, no one in Islamabad was interested at all in what I was trying to do. No one was interested in my questions about architecture and living space. People just got bored; they were polite, but no one really got excited. But every time someone got out documents, people constantly wanted to show them to me and talk to me about them, and some of the documents were really consequential. Finally, I moved into studying documents, but probably almost the whole time I was doing research in Islamabad, right until the end, I thought I was just studying documents for information about the city. I really got maniacal, collecting things, seeing files, and making notes about them like, “What does this file say about this neighborhood or that rule or that policy?” And it was only at the end of my time in Islamabad that I realized that documents themselves are going to have a role in my work, not just for what they talk about, but something else in themselves.

When I got back [from Islamabad], I was writing my dissertation and trying to develop a new way of research in urban planning, which was very oriented toward practices and documents, but documents were only a part of an urban planning story. Then I went to a conference and I gave a funny little paper on files, how they work and how people did politics around them. That became a chapter in the book afterwards. People found this paper very interesting, and I was really excited. We have an expression in English, “guilty pleasure”: something you really like, but think you shouldn’t like and you feel guilty about it, like a bad pop song. For me, these documents had been a guilty pleasure. I had become obsessed with the forms and how people sign things. It was the same as with someone who is obsessed with baseball cards or football statistics—it didn’t seem to be a proper academic topic, but rather a kind of a hobby. When I presented this paper, people were pretty interested and someone said to me, “There is a whole dissertation in this.”

I gradually began to think about what I should do for that, but half my dissertation was on urban planning and the other half was about documents. So when I got to the book, I thought the whole thing from start to finish should be about different kinds of documents. I wanted the book to be for people to understand cities and organizations, but I also wanted it to reflect on how one can make documents say interesting things about organizations and how they work. In some ways, it was very continuous with my original project. I set up the relationship between language and something in the world, in this case not buildings and neighborhoods, but

¹ The official website defines the organization as “a global network of 1.2 million neighbors, friends, leaders, and problem-solvers who come together to make positive, lasting change in communities at home and abroad” <https://www.rotary.org/en/about-rotary>

documents and their material qualities, a correlation between material qualities of documents and the way people use them to communicate, to symbolize other things, the politics, etc.

— **This is really interesting, as when I read the book I thought you had focused on the documents in the very beginning. The linkages to architecture are mostly apparent in a part on maps. The piece I found especially intriguing was with parchis² people used to get their way through. You’ve described a story about the person who prints those cards...**

— Yes, he had a huge file cabinet...

— **How many of those did he have?**

— I’ve never guessed, you know. Probably, close to a thousand. He had several of them for each person. He had them in a special place, something like a big cabinet, probably one meter by one meter with many little doors. I’d love to have put a picture of that in the book, but it was illegal, or quasi-legal, for him to use them for his own business. I don’t know how he actually organized this cabinet, but he could always find anything he needed, “Oh, you need this telephone number? I’ve got this guy.” He was always able to find it. I don’t know how many of them he had, definitely hundreds.

— **This is an ultimate representation of social capital.**

— It was hard to convey the texture of his relationships with people whose cards he printed. To some degree it was fraud, as he had no relationship with some of these people and just printed and used their cards. But in other cases, he was very friendly, the way officers in Pakistan were. Sometimes the officers would come by themselves to have cards printed just to see him. The reason I got to know him was that he was at the center of all these networks; he was a “blat” master, to use your term.³ It was a difficult thing, and I’m not sure if I did a good job describing this in the book because it was not a total fraud. It was somewhere in between. He hadn’t actually set these cards only for use with no personal connections to the people; he often did know them **people**. But anyway, when he passed these cards on to others, they were just functioning as completely detached from the government officers whose cards they were. The cards were symbols of his nearness to these officers—but that didn’t exist when he passed them on. He was a very fascinating character.

— **Was he ever suspected of doing these kind of things?**

— No, I don’t think he was. It might be that people who presented the cards didn’t get what they want, because it didn’t necessarily work. It was not illegal; it was not a fraud. It might just be that people are always kind of shaving things a little bit too much, implying they are a little bit closer to somebody than they really are. You know, if I’m trying to impress you or get you to do something, then I claim that I’m a little bit closer to some famous anthropologist than I really am. It is something you think you can get called out for, but not usually. Maybe I have a reputation of someone who is always bending things. It wouldn’t be like somebody would say, “He is fraud, he doesn’t even know this guy!” You would probably never figure out whether I do know that person. It wouldn’t be clear to you. He never really was going to get called out, partially because who would

² Parchis are scraps of paper with the visitor’s name, position and occasion of visit usually presented to the government officer or his secretary right before the meeting. In Russian realities we could talk of a specific form of business cards, which would also work as a form of personal recommendation.

³ In Russian culture (as well as previously in the Soviet times), “blat” [“блат”] is a form of corruption, the system of informal agreements, exchanges of services and connections to achieve results or get ahead. An exemplary research on blat was done by Alena Ledeneva; see: [Ledeneva 1998].

have an interest and who would bother? He was bribing people, too, but that's a whole different thing separate from his passing out cards—that's a totally different, though complementary, practice.

— **He is a really remarkable character, and I really enjoyed reading about him. One of the main questions with documents for me is whether this is a core feature of a state bureaucracy or can it also be found in a private organization. What do you think? Is it necessarily a feature of a state organization?**

— I have a strange explanation of that if you read the introduction to the book. One part of this is the elaborate way governments try to control vast amounts of things, many of which they don't really understand. There is a way in which documents can be seen more coming up in government circles than elsewhere. But the other part is that any time you have some kind of a structure where people are highly responsible to other people, you'll get this intense documentation.

If you take the classic Weberian perspective on bureaucracy, he's really **talk** about two things: One is the way the files are used to control social domain outside the office (the information about people, places and so on). The other thing is about controlling the people in the office. These two things are related, of course, but controlling people in the office is a different process than controlling how one of your inspectors is going to check out something. A single report would be both about something and also monitor an officer's performance. Documents are doing both at the same time, but there are two kinds of functions.

One part of it is how much you are trying to get your people to do something and how much are you really interested in making them "accountable" in political sense. You just have to report to me what you are doing, because this is really important. A government has a very strong accountability dimension to it. It doesn't mean that it is democratic necessarily. Microsoft or Google has some of these things as well, and they don't ever have to justify what they are doing, whereas democratic governments have to. I think that you can find these things in companies as well as governments, but the unique part of it is in the accountability side.

It's not just that huge overriding and pervasive political imperative that one has to satisfy. My insight comes from studying the very early English East India Company, which was a private corporation, but it was a little republic simultaneously.

We forget that corporations of that time were ~~little—they were~~ like guilds with their members—and basically the company was the first organization in the world that didn't have an individual who led by birth and title, like a king or a baron who embodied the law (and literally whatever he said would be a law). We have these tiny companies, these systems where people are constantly subjecting themselves to the supervision of the members (the people). In these companies, we can see an obsession with documentation, which we don't have even in the English monarchy at the time.

To oversimplify, if you look at England at the time, the way the government structures worked, the barons and the earls ran their areas while the king wrote laws, but they didn't have to tell anyone what they are up to. They are just doing it. They are not answerable particularly for what they are doing to other people; this is a key feature in this political structure. Conversely, early corporations were so democratic that everyone really was answerable, even the top guys, and they had an incredible amount of writing. Nowadays, corporations aren't really that much accountable to anybody, so you don't see as much of this kind of writing. Still you can see this accountability function in any company, and in most cases it's basically the same, but it's much stronger within a government, and that generates a huge amount of documents.

— **Maybe I was too influenced by Gupta and Ferguson's writings [Sharma, Gupta 2006] as I was reading the book, but I thought that documents serve as a way to both represent the state and practices of**

governmentality and build the images of the state, especially if we are talking about the state corporation. So do you think documents have any connection with these governmentality practices, or to put it in Scott's terms, "seeing like a state" [Scott 1998]?

— Yes, definitely! I see my own work as complementing ~~to~~ the works of people like James Scott and James Ferguson. In a sense I jump off from them. That's all really, really important, and documents are a mechanism for carrying out these dual functions of practical control projects and symbolizing the state. Private companies don't have to do as much to symbolize themselves via documents, because in some sense what the service governments provide us is ultimately documents, whereas Google is trying to give you a searching engine.

The other way documents are really important for governments is that that's their product—that's how they interact, like when you get a certificate. Coke wants to sell you Coke, and Nike wants to sell you sneakers; they are not selling recipes. I took your question in the wrong direction, but that [*a document*] is the product to think about the service provider. Providing electricity and so forth is alongside of electricity bill, and that's really important. Services are important, but at the same time, governments provide a huge amount of required documentation. You know, Google doesn't want to sell you documents.

— Do you think this is a special feature of some particular parts of government, like an accounting department or legal department? In my experience working at the postal service, there was a confrontation between the marketing department and the accounting department on the subject of public procurement. As a state organization, Russian Post has to hold a contest among private companies in order to make any kind of contract, and the accounting department makes it a long process, searching for any tiny mistake in the documents and following all kinds of regulations from the state. The logic here is, "We need to produce all these comments because they are part of our KPIs," and that prolongs the public procurement procedure for additional six months while they produce the comments in the texts.

— You've made a great point, and in some way you are answering your own question. We often think about the state as a unity, but there are different parts of it, with people who are oriented **at** different things, and therefore you see vast differences in the relationships toward documents and their role. If you look at the people who are in charge of waterworks or infrastructure and then you move to the people whose main objective of work is documents itself, the latter group is clearly more interested in the forms of documents and the relationships among them. The letter carrier has many relationships with people in the neighbourhood, and you might give him a little money at Christmas and talk to him, but your relationship is not mediated by paper (except paper money). As you move up to the person who's doing nothing but moving documents around, his or her relationships with other people in the organization are very much about the circulation of paper.

The methodological value of focusing on documents is that you're really trying to sort out many functions of documents as well as the different roles they have for people. We shouldn't think about documents as such, but more about what kind of document it is, what kind of place, and how it is actually working out.

— You've mentioned that government workers need to justify their actions because of accountability. They produce a lot of documents as they are trying to be transparent. Is there a situation when we don't need to focus on documents but on the process of documents "working out" instead?

— That's always a challenging question. I suggest this is more of a continuum. If you think about government bureaucracy in the construction area, there are people who just work a crane and rarely see a work-related document. Even though they probably have some kind of paperwork to do, that would be one end of the government work that doesn't really depend much on documents.

At the other end, you find people who are mainly doing things through documents. It is very difficult to make an analytic distinction, partly because it is always an empirical question: What is driving a process? We have understood a lot of things about bureaucracy for a long time, before we started really working on documents as such. Weber was right; norms are very important. As a scholar, I don't see myself replacing earlier accounts of bureaucracy. Sometimes it's more about norms and what people take to be important; sometimes it's practices that don't have a central relationship with documents that are really important. So even when you find an office saturated with the circulation of documents, it may not be where the story is actually happening.

I think it is very much an empirical question, and that is a very unsatisfying reply. As a typical anthropologist, I have a "get out of jail free" card for that. Generally, the higher your management is, except if you go to the highest levels, the more intensely it is focused on documents. If you want an analytic rule, I would say that documents are not generally that important at the very low levels and at the very high levels. It is a kind of middling phenomenon. People at the top often don't write at all actually. They sign things, but they never actually prepare the documents and worry about the particular forms of them—it's a fascinating thing. We have this funny expression in the U.S.: "My **people talk** to your people." If we are really important people, we talk and figure out things, we make a deal, and we decide what's going to happen. Then my people will talk to your people at a meeting (and that is the vast number of people who are subordinates), and they will get together and produce the documents that eventually you and I will sign.

This again comes back to the accountability question, as people at the top are generally less accountable in many ways. They are close to this ideal of embodying decision-making power in themselves. Whatever they say goes. It never reaches that point in the modern world, but as you move up, you get a little closer to that, while everyone in the middle is constantly justifying themselves to each other, all the time. I guess there is one rule: From the middle as you go way down and way up, there tends to be a declining importance in terms of writing to the way things happen. You never get free of your subordinates, who control you by what documents you get, what you see. But at the same time you become a kind of end consumer. You are not a person who controls large flows of paper in order to do business, in contrast to people in the middle, whose capacity to organize things is all about moving things around in a certain way and getting things written down to the right people.

— **Then there comes another question. One of the most important ideas of the book is the focus on documents as mediators. But what kind of mediators and what parts do they connect? For example, if you have a correspondence flow between people, it would be a customer-to-customer segment. Then you have customer-to-business and business-to-customers segments, such as direct or junk mailings. Then there is a government-to-customers segment, including notations about your taxation, pension or something similar. Rarely do people write to government services—it may happen, but mostly it's the other the government-to-customers segment. In this example, documents work as a mediator between different levels and types of authorities. In organizations you have higher levels and lower levels, which are also connected by documents. But talking about mediators, what do they mediate? What would be the most important entities for them to mediate?**

— That's a great question; however, I warn you that you might find my answer unsatisfying [*laughs*]. The fascinating thing about documents is they are actually extremely flexible. There are things in the world, like a house and land. Then the document is mainly linking people and a house and a piece of land to a government office and putting it into the tax system, so the document mediates that relationship.

Other documents are much more like memos and files; they mediate relationships among people in the office. So really the thing about documents is the flexibility of the medium. It's just a piece of paper, a kind of thing that is essentially a mediator. In any relationship you have, you can use a document to mediate it. No matter

what the relationship between a person and a thing or between people at different levels, you can create some structure to a document that will mediate it.

It's not that easy, because you are talking about a document that would get people talking across levels, and it's difficult to think of a single document that would connect all these different worlds and people. It's very difficult to imagine. It [*the document*] can't do anything. But in terms of small numbers of people or people who follow a certain kind of classes, documents connect all kinds of people as long as they are designed correctly. Who is going to participate in the writing of it, how is the circulation going to move, and is the language understandable for everyone?

In general, any attempt to specify the most important relationships that documents mediate in advance would probably not be productive. However, you can probably look at your own organization and say, "Here, in this organization, here are the key documents." My attempt in the book was to give an example of many different kinds of documents and how they work. So someone could say, "Oh, well, I don't have visiting cards, but I do have something like the maps, so I could use that from a methodological point of view". The other way to think about that is that these are the documents that, at least in my limited experience of bureaucracy, were really, really important.

When I talk about files, that's mainly about all the people coming to decisions and not about stuff beyond the office. It's difficult to answer in general, but from a method point of view, you might ask, "What range of things is in use here? And what is each of them doing?" Another way of saying what they mediate is what new impact on relationships do they have.

It's straightforward to just ask people, "Why are you writing this?" and "Where is it going?" People usually can tell you. But it doesn't mean that it's a trivial question; it's something that people concentrate on in their work, and when you can write about it, you actually make a contribution.

So in general it's a difficult question, but the key thing is to have some variety in the kinds of documents you look at. Don't assume that writing is doing one thing or documents are doing one thing. It's better to look broadly at documentation by discovering the two or three forms that are really important in a process.

Alternatively, there is also a storytelling aspect that asks, "How do you make what's going on in the organization vivid by concentrating on a few places or a few kinds of writing?" For example, how would you tell the story of a management change in terms of documentation? I faced this actual challenge in writing my book because two of the original chapter drafts had nothing to do with documents. One was about office life, such as how people sat and interacted in an office environment. I said to myself, "I have to make it about documents." I started to read my notes on office interactions, trying to find whether any documents were used there, and I found I hadn't noticed how much people used their visiting cards and petitions in these strange relationships. Suddenly the documents just jump out. It's the same story of office life with different main characters and documents; people, furniture, and architecture become the supporting characters. It can be an experiment: You take a document and say, "I'll make it central and see what will come out of that."

A lot of stuff in this chapter is about interactions that are entirely determined by the documents, but the question is, how much of an organization's story be told by using documents? Let's imagine that documents are the only explanatory thing you have at all. How far can you push that? Of course, this is not how it works; there's a lot of stuff going on—"if you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail." I have a document method so every organization looks document-obsessed and driven by a documentary process, but that's a method point of view. It is almost like laboratory isolation; you can question what the norms, roles, or rules are and push them to their maximal explanatory limit. But you always have to come back from this isolation. So it's difficult to answer

what documents are mediating; you might better focus on what they are doing. If I gave a talk at your institution, I'd ask you just to bring a document, and then we would talk about it. Stories bloom from a document, as relationships and mediations come out when you start to analyze it. That's probably a classical anthropological response: That it's all is very complicated . . . and that's the strength and bane of our discipline [*laughs*]!

— **This is really great, as you can build an entire network with documents in the centre. However, my first association was of another kind. If we take Weber's legal authority in bureaucracy, documents would work as main mediators. What is there instead for charismatic or traditional types of authority, maybe some pieces of jewellery or secret symbols one shows to people to confirm affiliation and status? Or to put the question in another way: If we just remove the documents from a bureaucratic system, will it continue to work with other types of mediators?**

— That's a good question. There is a lot of order in these organizations, even physically—who sits where, how does the office look, where are the chairs and doors, who can come in and who can't. The material order of the physical space is very important. It is so obvious that we don't talk much about it anymore, while it does a lot of work. For example, it's fascinating to watch how people try to sit down at a table. This can happen in a faculty meeting or in an office. There's some settling of the order even without documents: How do people explicitly claim their hierarchical order and certain kinds of relationships with others by their position? Do they even attempt to deny high status by sitting against the wall and not at the table? The physical space doesn't determine what to do, but it helps people express some aspect of their connections. Where will the chairperson sit at a faculty meeting, maybe at the front? But the new chair does not want to sit there because the previous chair used to do that, and it's too hierarchical. So he sits somewhere else to deny this hierarchy or just to mitigate his inevitable relationship of superiority. Then you have powerful figures sitting back by the wall to pretend they are not there. The table and chairs provide a way to look at these relationships. We couldn't be what we are without expressing these types of connections. We need the table and other stuff to express ourselves, to have these relationships. It is not documented at all; it's not even in language.

This is the same for bureaucratic offices in Pakistan: it's super important who sits at the front in a meeting, who sits next to him, who comes in the office first, and who gets access to the senior officer. Another issue would be the access to instruments—computers, material stuff. But this is all very blunt, not precise. **There** are mediators that are tremendously important for setting the conditions for bureaucratic life. That's a precondition, but **there** are blunt instruments. We have an office, and what do we do then? These things layer onto one another. You can't have an office without documents, and you can't have a bureaucracy without an office. You just can't imagine bureaucracy without a place where people meet and articulate their relationship in terms of architectural space. In that sense I totally agree with Weber.

What are other kinds of mediators? Certainly there are clothes, as the way people dress is very complex. Bathrooms. I wrote about how types of toilets are linked to rank in Pakistani bureaucracy. Of course, it can't be a serious book if it talks about bathrooms! But it is serious. Also consider the room temperature, such as the way people experience the temperature in the room and whether they sweat or shiver. Sweat might be a mediator for the lowest steps in the hierarchy. That's a great point you have raised, how charismatic authority does not work through documents. Charisma uses other mediators, like voice. The voice is very important—it is sensually connected to the body and the individual, which is the source of the charisma. We don't usually think about sound, but oral speech is another type of mediation. Writing is essential, but there is an irreducible role for speech as well.

— **This all leads to the question you've probably been asked before. What happens with all these material artifacts and environment when everything goes virtual and migrates to the Internet? There are many examples of what I'm talking about: e-governmental practices, using electronic signatures, and**

even losing the materiality of the voice and living conditions. What happens when we lose this materiality and are left with only the documents?

— That’s a complicated question. In fact, that’s not one question, but many. The effects are quite different depending on what technology you are talking about. The key thing is not that materiality goes away—it doesn’t. The question is how discourse and relationships are mediated differently by computers, databases, and website portals, producing documents. All this stuff is obviously just other kinds of materiality that has to be attended to carefully; it’s not a contradiction between paper and electronic mediums. What happens to certain kinds of databases when you move them online and can manipulate them? The effects can be huge and quite unexpected.

A PhD student at Michigan is working on identity systems in Pakistan, which have become really controversial. For many years in Pakistan, there were identity cards on which you’d have all your basic information, and you could show this card wherever you wanted. Now the country is starting an electronic system. It’s not about physical possession anymore (that you can show the card); it’s the status of the card according to a database. This is similar to a credit card: If a company thinks there has been fraudulent activity on a card, it will block it. For example, if I drive to California, far from my residence, and make a charge, the credit card company will think it is a fraudulent charge. If I had travelled by plane, the credit card algorithms would see that I am there, but without a plane ticket, the computer thinks I should still be in Michigan. The credit card company will block my card until I have confirmed by phone that I went to California and purchased something.

So in Pakistan, the ID card system runs the same way. The card is to prove validity, not to provide textual and visual information. To move between cities, you have to move through checkpoints. You have to give the police your card, not just show your card to have your info read and your picture seen. They run it electronically, and if your card is not valid, you won’t be able to move.

— Why did they implement such a system?

— It is a peculiarity of Pakistan because it is very security-oriented now, and maybe this is an exotic example. But the government also requires this ID card for banking, taking your child to school, and receiving other public services. When you’re asked to present an ID, you used to just show it, but now officers will run it through a machine to see if it is still valid. If it is not, you can’t do anything. The government can now run algorithms to decide if you are up to something that supposedly threatens security and invalidate your citizenship temporarily until you clear this problem. This is a huge thing in itself, but consider how it used to work before: You went to an officer, and he looked at your documents. Somebody knew the rules and had evidence of how these rules applied to you, and you could talk about it.

Bureaucracies are famously unresponsive; however, there are humans who can explain the whole problem to some extent. Today, you have somebody who’s writing these algorithms (a computer coder somewhere in a secret office) and a bureaucrat who has some of your info but doesn’t know **how** what the algorithm found. If you come to his office, he will tell you that you’ve been put on the list, but he doesn’t know why. It is not a law; it is simply an algorithm. Even if you could ask the guy who wrote the algorithm, he still couldn’t tell you. This is an algorithm that finds a set of bizarre correlations among residence, transactions, and so forth. Nobody can tell you why you have been deprived of your rights, as the decision is beyond human understanding and even knowledge. You end up with a completely unaccountable system, and no one can do anything about it.

It all sounds very exotic, but that’s very similar to how credit scores work now: Big databases set your credit rating and, to some extent, tell you why you got that rating. In many ways, it’s hard to find out what you did that lowered or raised your score. The United States’ “No Fly List,” which prohibits people from flying, has

the same problem. There are many issues with these databases and algorithms that are beyond human understanding, and that's a fascinating thing.

There is also a lot of electronic stuff aimed at reducing corruption. The attempt is to eliminate human beings' involvement in writing and circulation (and other functions) in this process, e. g. in land ownership records. What we find here is that this empowers different people in different ways. I am not saying it is going to be worse or better in every way—there is no single story about how this happens. You have to look at the processes and investigate, how this translation from one form to another is done (as many things are eliminated just to simplify the process), who has an access to these databases, and where are the certificates produced. All these things configure how the land is managed.

There is no single answer to the question of how it's happening. But there is a set of methods directly related to how we understand documents, who is participating in them, who can write on and read them, who has access to them, and how they circulate... All of these things have parallels in electronic records, and you can look at them to see what's happening.

Then there's a whole technical side of things, like algorithms, that have no counterpart with documents. They do not follow rules set by humans. If we go back to Weber, there has to be laws, and those laws have to be understandable. Algorithms don't have to be understandable to be algorithms and to function like laws. Here comes an interesting divergence from the government's role for a hundred of years: New things are being enforced like laws, but they don't have to have the structure of laws, so people could understand them and discuss whether they are justly applied. The way electronic documents work is close to the way paper documents work. But electronic documents don't replace paper; they complement it in a different way. That's an interesting thing: People are trying to get rid of paper, but then you find them printing out documents due to simply not trusting the electronic system. So there is no single answer to your question. It depends on what kind of system you are talking about.

— Thanks for bringing up this question and distinction between electronic and paperwork in the system configuration. Another idea about Weberian bureaucracy is that it should be impersonal. As you are discussing the Pakistan system, you mention this influential person Zaffar Khan, who obviously follows the rules but sometimes steps aside and makes a shift in the system. These things are impossible for the work of the electronic. We are unable to find feedback from the system if we are deprived of our rights or we face a solution we don't agree upon. What would be an equivalent of someone stepping in and solving the problem in an electronic world?

— This is, again, a matter of how the system is structured. With an electronic system, government employees will gradually build overrides for different rights, and the question will be who gets the password for the overrides. There will be a technical side of providing people with these passwords, which is about access and levels of access. And there will be a political side, determining who has the authority to define the level of access. These issues often match up, but not always. The officer probably is not going to do these things himself; he will authorize someone else to do it. My guess is that everything will become more rigid and consequential. What I have seen in Pakistan is that the government would just do a restatement without a reason, which is the equivalent of somebody walking in and saying, "We will just change it. We will just take this person off the list. We don't understand why he was there in the first place, but we are sure that was a mistake." But when Zaffar Khan solves the problem in a paper-based process, he writes a certain document and signs it. The electronic system does not permit this kind of flexibility. In electronic forms, you just put in the information. They are very rigid compared to paper forms where you can leave things off. The government employees will have to put in overrides.

Electronic systems will not allow you to skip any piece of information. There is inflexibility built into them, and this technical side of providing overrides will be combined with formalized or informal tolerance among bureaucrats saying, as Zaffar Khan does, “We are going to change it.” If the system stays the way it is, there is no technical capacity to do it—like when Zaffar Khan writes a note and sends it. The officials have to put that in a system—when he gives his order, someone can do something about it. And right now this [*electronic*] system does not have it. The question is, to what extent will they implement these things? But the trouble is that the system is intended precisely to keep anyone from sweeping in like this. It’s interesting to see how everything will come out.

— **Here can emerge an entirely new group of people who are capable of showing up and shifting things, e. g. IT-systems employees. If your computer dies, it doesn’t matter whether you have access. If your computer breaks down, there’s another person, who is a mediator in the system now. You can see that people who used to be important lose their authority because a bunch of newcomers say, “Okay, you will not be able to operate the whole system, as we’ve build it up and we know how it works, and you don’t.” This is not only about power distribution.**

— That’s a terrific observation. IT-system employees have a real capacity to shunt people aside, and the role of low-level IT people and the access they have is essential. In the U.S., if I get fired from my job, the first person to know it is the person who decides to fire me, and then he tells my boss, and everything travels down the chain. But before that, he tells the IT director that I am getting fired, so he can shut down my computer. He will say to the tech guy, “Matthew Hull’s getting fired on Tuesday at noon. You need to shut down his access to the entire thing at 11:59.” The one who’s going to be fired doesn’t know about it. When somebody in corporate America is to be fired, he walks into a meeting, and while he’s in the meeting, his computer access is cancelled. The IT worker has to set it up in advance.

I couldn’t agree more with you; this is completely a new role that doesn’t exist with documents. That’s a shift and a general observation. IT people have no equivalent in the document world, as they always know things in advance and have access as technical people, not as people in authority or their immediate assistants. The IT people always have access. They try to compensate it with a quasi-legal set of procedures in the IT department in governmental organizations when an IT employee logs on and the system checks who he is. But IT employees are the ones who set that up! So there is a group of technical specialists outside of the normal organizational order who have a backdoor access. And this is important. The other thing is that these technical specialists design the system, and the regular staff and officers can’t fully understand or operate it.

— **Still, there can be an equivalent of typed or hand-written documents. Maybe you have heard of the practice of postal censorship, when state security employees check citizens’ mailings. Or it is not part of the government production?**

— Right! I guess the difference is that the police also have a governmental function. It is a separate organization, but it is usually regulated by something, at least by bureaucratic permissions.

What’s fascinating is that IT people at any organization are those who don’t need have access to information to make decisions, but nevertheless they are given it. I think this is a new requirement of this highly technical electronic system. Through a back door, the system invites a bunch of people who are neither the police nor the intelligence people. They can do what they want, and they don’t just sit back there; they have a role in designing the bureaucratic procedures. One thing about technical stuff is access, and another one is the way tech people redo the actual policy, because policy is weirdly embedded in technology.

My favourite example is of a land-holding system in South India, though it may be an exotic example from your point of view. There are all kinds of strange holding structures, where people have different bundles of rights to do something with the land. We call them all holdings, but they are really different—for example, one kind of holding might be that one person has a right to farm a piece of land while another person has a right to a share of the produce and to transfer it. Government officers put together a system and reduced the number of different holdings because they wanted the index of the type of holding within one byte of information. So they took all of these holdings and decided, “Ah, we’re just going to combine most of those and have 256 kinds of holdings because that’s the amount of information that can be held in one byte.” This is an obvious and oversimplified example of how a technical decision turns into a policy: Three-quarters of kinds of holdings were eliminated.

The same people write algorithms too. In Pakistan, they are under the direction of intelligence services, who tell them, “We are concerned about people with particular ‘signatures,’ sets of characteristics and actions, such as buying a gun in two different cities.” Details are going to be worked out by computer programmers, and it turns out that intelligence people won’t know how to specify all the circumstances that will put someone on the list and invalidate his card. Is it three days or three years between buying guns? What locations count as different cities? What should they do if your first cousin buys a gun? What if it is your second cousin? All of those different areas of personal information, even the kinship information, is worked out by programmers who work on the code, who make tons of little decisions they are not really thinking about since no one gave them the instructions. So they begin to act like bureaucrats, essentially writing out the security policy rules. There is general policy and there is a certain task about what correlations of human activity should be counted as a potential threat to the nation.

It’s technical, and therefore it is largely not documented and is out of the realm of understanding and popular discussion. The technical team is not keeping minutes of its meetings. The one thing that concerns me with the electronic stuff is that this is unaccountable because of the technical quality. So much of what people are doing now is outside of their capacity to understand it. No one really knows how the algorithm produced the information and why an outcome took place. That’s a new feature of bureaucracy that has never existed before. Previously, if officers classified you as a potential threat, they were legally required to tell you why. But now we are losing that. We are seeing that both in Pakistan and on the American “No Fly List.” And you can imagine the proliferation of systems that do not have any kind of accountability at all. It’s not even only accountability; we’re just unable to understand now how specific outcomes come about.

— You’ve chosen Pakistan as an object of study. Can we compare bureaucracy there to bureaucracy in India and Bangladesh or other British postcolonial countries? Or can we say that these features are typical for bureaucracies of the Global South or the postcolonial world? Maybe it is a worldwide feature? Part of your book discusses British bureaucratic practices implemented into the Pakistani system from the very beginning, so Pakistan kind of inherited them. What do you think about that?

— I think that it is very easy to say that the British Empire really was quite good at moving ideas around and moving practices around with people, to some extent.

There is a conference I am going to at Columbia next week about bureaucracy and empire, looking at the way the people move around this whole system and how forms of writing held the British Empire together. I am a bit skeptical of how far one can go with writing as the explanation, but certainly to some extent all of these governments really came out of one system, so they all have a genetic relationship. I have done a lot of work in the last few years in India, and it has a lot in common with Pakistan. The laws are the same; the procedures are the same. The two countries have even changed in the same way. So, I think there is a huge continuity within the same continent, but it’s also essential how they have transformed in the post-colonial period. From my own

experience, documents are probably more important in South Asia than here in the U.S. I'd say more things are mediated through either talking to people or rules that do not produce documents. In the U.S., people make rules, and then other people follow them more or less. In India, it is all about whether you have a document. So you can look at the different places in broad ways, because we have documents in the U.S. too. But different documents are more or less salient in certain contexts and places.

These broad questions are very interesting, and they're difficult to answer. I mean, the Chinese bureaucracy has been around for ages, and it's very well developed. Places like China have very different writing traditions and different ideas about the way representation works and about the symbolism of documents. That might be a slightly different set of concerns. Otherwise, I think you can really use a kind of approach that I am articulating in a book about studying how documents work in distinct places.

— **This is an intriguing issue, as you can compare the ethical values or whatever lays at the very core of the entire organization of a system. Talking out of my experience, sometimes you can feel a huge inequality in a way things works even in the same culture, even at the same corporation.**

— Yes, it is not even cross-cultural, but as you say, within the same company or between different companies in one place. I know someone in the telecom industry who worked for a very small company that grew very big, very fast. It was a '90s company, one of those called "fast companies," which very high-tech and very result-oriented. The founders considered themselves entrepreneurs, not corporate people. Then they were bought by Sprint, the oldest telecom company in the U.S., which is very bureaucratic.

Here is an example: He had a food machine, like a little dispenser, outside of his office or somewhere in the hall. He was in a Sprint office, and his new colleagues were Sprint people when the companies merged. He told the administrative assistant handling the machine that the light bulb in the machine was out, and she replied, "Oh yeah, I'll file a form for that." My friend just went crazy as he had to get a form in order to get a light bulb to fix the machine. He had been thinking about leaving, but he was completely set off by the paperwork to replace the 59-cent bulb in the vending machine. He said, "How can I work in a place where every little thing has to be documented?"

Documents are very good at worming their way into tiny little relationships, even making such relationships emerge. If you are a manager, how do you get yourself into controlling a low-level administrative assistant who is going to buy a bulb? That is not an easy thing to do, but a piece of paper does it. If you require documentation for everything, you end up inserting yourself in the very tiny little ways things are done. And some managers want to do that; some kinds of companies want to do that. Some probably do not. That would be an interesting way of contrasting even a single organization.

— **That reminds me of Graeber's "bullshit jobs" concept. These jobs are mostly about filling out forms, especially at huge companies. The forms provide people with work to do, and employers can hire more, and therefore we have more bureaucracy. Of course, one can meet these types of processes in both state and private companies. Are there any patterns here? This is not a national feature, and it does not depend on the size of the company or the area of production.**

— I would think that the key really is the degree to which people want to make others accountable for what they do—that is a crucial thing. Accounting for your actions is sometimes different from doing your job. If you really want to make sure that people are doing the things just the way you want them done, documents are really good. If you focus more on getting things done, then you do have a document, but it is one document. It seems to me that the key difference is the degree to which people want to control the activities of those underneath them and to what level of specificity. Reasons for wanting control vary. There can be political reasons,

as the government obviously has to be able to say, “We are actually doing the right thing.” Everyone from the government is accountable outside, much less than the way corporations work. The processes themselves generate the ethics of accountability; it is a two-way cycle. I am not going to say that you have an ideal value and then you will be driven into the paperwork. Rather, certain values are important, and the paperwork system comes up around them and paper maintains that value of accountability. So, paperwork is like the table [*in the office environment*]: It allows people to realize the goals of hierarchy.

— **It seems that this logic of accountability should be a feature of rationalization and capitalistic values, as somehow they are connected. Maybe you can broaden the term “political economy of paper”? Is there anything we can do to shift it, and is it necessary to shift it? Or we are okay with the whole phenomenon?**

— As it was in the book, the idea is very narrow, an attempt to look at the circulation of paper as being something like an economy. The idea is that goods, services, and production—all that is connected with the larger project of governing—go beyond simply the economic. It is all about economic penetration: political decisions as well as the economic ones. You make money often by changing the regulations or capturing the files, especially in highly regulated industries. In telecom, for example, you put more subscribers to your network or you get the regulations changed. It is sometimes much easier to make money the second way. So in the “political economy of paper,” I was thinking about how the circulation of documents is both about control and procedure—things that are not considered part of economy. It is a good question; could you talk about the political economy of paper more generally?

I think that you could to some extent. Many people see bureaucracy as a kind of the classic mode of boxing things in, slowing them down, and so on. I also see bureaucracy as certainly dysfunctional in many ways, but partly coming out of the rule of law and the attempts that we have to prevent somebody just coming in and saying, “Well, you look deserving, so I am going to give you the stuff or not.” Bureaucracy has become dysfunctional, but in the core it’s not about rigidity and boxing the things in. It is about being accountable to other people, the ones who are actually paying for this. Alternatives are that someone is making decisions because they like you or because you are a friend of a friend.

— **But is it a capitalistic feature?**

— I would say no, actually. It can be capitalistic, but it does not have to be. Again, these are complicated questions that I would certainly open, but my own feeling is that these things are fundamentally about accountability, which has an eccentric relationship with capitalism. Accountability can be a part of capitalist organizations, but it does not have to do with making money per se. There are a lot of historical examples. For example, in the early 1600s, the early East India Company was the model for the Virginia Company, which established what became the American state of Virginia. Both of these corporations were very democratic and also very capitalistic. In the case of the Virginia Company, the Virginians maintained this capitalist enterprise and generated tons and tons of documentation. The Massachusetts Bay Company, which established the state of Massachusetts, started with the same capitalist model, at least in form. But it quickly got rid of the capitalist stuff altogether. They basically said, “We are not going to do this business.” But the democratic accountability was still there—they also became obsessed with the documentation. The core thing in being an organization with a bunch of members but no real head, is that everyone has to consider each other as accountable to everyone. I have to constantly worry about whatever everyone else is doing because everyone is like, “I am answerable to you, you are answerable to me. So, we are going to produce documents constantly.” And that has to do with accountability flowing from the structure of the organization as a democratic institution. Here are two cases: one very capitalist and one not particularly anticapitalistic, but neutral as the goal of organization, and they both are obsessed with writing.

— **How would accountability fit, for example, into the values of being creative and building new practices? If you have to be accountable and don't have to follow the rules, you actually have to break them. Would that mean that you will produce less documents?**

— A good question again. Let us actually take a step back, if I can ask you to bear with me for a minute. Documentation is about accountability and there are many other types of it, not only the democratic one. My wife, Krisztina Fehervary, does research on Hungary, so I have spent a lot of time in Hungary and reading about the Hungarian and the Eastern European bureaucracies, both of which had different reasons for being accountable. But if you look at what Alexis de Tocqueville talked about in the U.S., he observed incredible conformity. He found that everyone in America was constantly worried about what everyone else thought about them and constantly adjusting themselves in all kinds of ways. It makes people very creative in a certain way and makes them very good at forming groups. Tocqueville thought, though, that in other ways Americans were much less creative than a typical European bourgeois or aristocrat, who did not care as much about what everyone thinks of them. I think that documents work similarly. You constantly have to be accountable to other people; it has a stultifying effect on creativity and so on and so forth; there is definitely a trade-off with that. This aspect is very uncapitalistic, at least as we have this kind of supercharged capitalism. But capitalism is such a complex thing to think about that here we have to articulate a more precise version of it.

The other kind is corporate capitalism, which has an uncomfortable relationship with creativity. If you talk to a company manager and ask, “Do you want a big new product that will excite everyone or do you just want to make sure that everyone is going to buy your old junk?” he or she might well take the second option. The manager would love to have a totally predictable environment where people are going to buy whatever the company makes. Why? Because it can completely dominate the markets, every supply chain, having a hundred per cent market share, for whatever they make. In an institutional sense, corporate capitalism is often more political, because it is more about controlling the domain of activity. This does not require the creativity of coming up with the new product everyone will just want. The most profitable companies now are virtual monopolies. In the U.S. we have cable companies. They don't have to innovate at all because they have a monopoly and they make a lot of money. That is capitalism. So, it is a certain kind of corporate capitalism. What you asked in the question can be very loaded: Is capitalism really about institutional innovations or is it about simply capturing something? Some tech corporations who talk about disruption aside, most CEOs are not Joseph Schumpeter,⁴ who imagined capitalism as having incredible churn and creativity, with the new produced through destruction of the old. Schumpeter is like a nightmare for those corporate managers.

So, again, it is a complicated question. If you want to make a capitalism argument, it would be best to explain what aspect of capitalism you are talking about and how it relates to this in general. The East India Company made money because it had a monopoly on the import of goods from India, so that was great. That was corporate capitalism right there, and that is very, very profitable. But it's all about real bureaucracy, control, and stability. All The East India Company wanted was stable prices and goods. They loved rules like this, as it helps them make money. But it is very different from companies like tech companies or the Chinese outsourcing of some processes. So again, if you are talking about that kind of capitalism, documents are not so good. But there are a lot of successful historic forms of capitalism.

— **Thank you so much. I think we are done with most of the questions that I've had!**

— Thank you, these have been really thought-provoking and difficult questions.

By Elena Gudova,
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⁴ Joseph Schumpeter, an Austrian-born American economist and political scientist.