



The Fantastic and the Banal: Rethinking Bureaucratic Authority

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A Graduate Student Conference

Do only masochists relish the thought of dealing with bureaucracies and



bureaucrats? Facing the seemingly endless waiting and run-arounds so frequently associated with phone calls and visits to bureaucratic offices, sometimes it seems so. Yet despite – or perhaps because of – the seeming indifference and alienating power of such experiences, bureaucracy can reach into the most intimate spaces of life, from before birth to after death. Human lives are measured at least in part by paper trails and material traces—documents, forms, certificates, photographs, signatures, stamps, and thumb prints. If, as Latour contended, bureaucratic documents are the ‘most despised of all ethnographic objects,’ then in promoting their significance we risk fetishizing them. Yet that risk—along with the risk of boredom—is one we invite you to take with us as we ask, How can we both understand and challenge the contours of bureaucratic authority? What can bureaucracies tell us about contemporary life? What is at stake in identifying intimacy in bureaucracy?

Bureaucracy is mundane and absurd, blasé and infuriating, orderly and convoluted. Weber recognized the paradoxical qualities of bureaucracy, heralding it as the hallmark of modern social organization – one that promises routinization, standardization, and rationality, but also delivers tedium and disenchantment. Bureaucracy is clarity-meets-opacity par excellence with a dash of the superfluous, the ridiculous, and the impossibly kind thrown in as well. In this conference, we aim to rethink bureaucracy by attending to its iterations and contradictions, from the banal to the fantastic. We contend that bureaucratic authority is crucial for understanding contemporary issues across the humanities and social sciences, including, but not limited to, various forms of governmentality; humanitarianism; development projects and neoliberal reforms; issues of sovereignty, citizenship and human rights; affect; social movements; and the movements of peoples and goods across and within borders. In highlighting the breadth of social scientific research and theorizing on bureaucracy, we welcome papers from all disciplines on topics speaking to our theme.



The Fantastic and the Banal: Rethinking Bureaucratic Authority is a two-day interdisciplinary conference organized by graduate students in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Events are free and open to the public. The conference will be held Friday, September 27 and Saturday, September 28 and will include panels moderated by University of Colorado faculty. Matthew Hull, associate professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan, will give the keynote address.

For more information and for conference updates, please visit our website at <http://rethinkingbureaucracy.tumblr.com/>. While we cannot provide funds for travel, most meals will be included, and free housing may be available with anthropology graduate students.