



Current Trends in the Anthropology of Bureaucracy - A Report

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The study of bureaucracy has become a standard prerogative of English-language anthropology in recent years. Long gone are the days when bureaucracy was considered the exclusive realm of political scientists and sociologists, in an intellectual division of labour where anthropology was assumed to be the study of “non-bureaucratic societies”. In addition to the anthropologists who have become



centrally concerned with public bureaucracies (Matthew Hull, Laura Bear, Nayanika Mathur, Akhil Gupta, Colin Hoag, David Graeber to name a few), others have encountered the subject through a separate route, often in the form of paperwork circulating among their interlocutors or discourses reproduced about “the state” and its nebulous operations. The growing anthropological interest in bureaucracy might be a sign of our own times as Graeber argues, yet it is also a knowledge-making project with implications beyond the bounds of social anthropology, whether in other disciplines or in the wider public.

With this context in mind, I have convened a seminar series at Oxford this winter term to gather ethnographers who have conducted fieldwork on different bureaucratic sites, in areas ranging from Jordan to France to Cameroon to the United States. There was no common thread in the selection of presentations other than this interest in the ethnography of bureaucracy, and contributions were elicited with the intention of diversifying case studies and approaches to the subject – including perspectives from gender and sexuality studies, linguistic anthropology, political theory, and science and technology studies.

Despite the range of presentations, the seminars addressed common themes concerning the gap between bureaucratic ideals and practices, the ethical dimensions of bureaucratic work, and the materiality and affectivity of paperwork (including in its digitized guise).

This report is an attempt to gather these common threads together while highlighting the individual contributions made by each paper, most of which await publication. The seminar series was held in Christ Church and supported by the Christ Church Research Centre.

Eda Pepi started off the series with a paper on family registers in Jordan. A seemingly innocuous document where citizens record their family ties, the register has become a contested site for the redefinition of what constitutes Jordanian citizenship. With historical and ethnographic erudition, Pepi explained how Jordan’s gendered and racist citizenship laws, where male Jordanians with a



“non-Jordanian” father and especially those of Palestinian descent are always liable to be denationalized, are negotiated by Jordanian women who seek to register their male kin to ensure that they will not arbitrarily lose their rights. Without being able to pass on citizenship on their own, Jordanian women navigate the constraints imposed by state institutions on their kin’s ability to access state services and own property via unexpected uses of a personal registration document comparable to a state-sanctioned family tree, which has become in effect a more potent proof of identity than national passports.

Michael Prentice gave a paper attempting to answer a simple question: what is a corporation? Based on fieldwork in a South Korean firm, Prentice complicated the idea that the corporation is a single agency acting with a common and united will, because it is in fact a set of cooperating groups with legal and hierarchical ties that are not necessarily unified in everyday operations. With attention to the daily work conducted by the Human Resources and Public Relations division within his firm, Prentice showed how the corporation’s power to act is not always unilaterally exercised from the top, but can also be constrained by the different types of expertise handled by various divisions within the corporation. This expertise shapes different expectations about the nature of the corporation itself and thereby allows expert actors to reframe and redefine what can be decided on behalf of “the corporation” by higher-level decision-makers. The broader issue raised by Prentice was the extent to which corporations and state bureaucracies, two social forms that are traditionally deemed distinct, can be compared based on this kind of relationship between expert knowledge and hierarchical authority.

José-María Muñoz gave a detailed account of the regulation of terrestrial freight transportation between Cameroon and Chad, specifically in the Douala-N’djamena corridor. Based on extensive fieldwork within the Cameroonian National Freight Bureau (BGFT) as well as among truckers manning the freight trade, Muñoz described the successive changes to the bureau’s administration and regulations, including material changes in paperwork going up to recent attempts at digitization. The presentation neatly illustrated how paperwork never really disappears or “dematerializes” in the bureau’s work, as according to the



dominant ideology circulated by modernizing elites nationally and internationally, but is rather rematerialized by accommodating existing paper-based arrangements with new practices of digital control over them. Muñoz's intervention is an excellent illustration of relative successes and failures in a transition to digital administration where the "heaviness" (*pesanteur*) of paper-based practices is what allows bureaucratic regulation to remain effective under conditions where it is deemed to be hindered by these very practices.

[Seamus Montgomery](#) presented on his fieldwork among European Union bureaucrats under the Juncker commission. Montgomery became interested in Juncker's announced project to create "a more political administration" in Brussels, which brought his interlocutors to reflect on the central tension between their professional image as neutral "technocrats" and what some of them perceived as an undue simplification of their bureaucratic work in an era marked by populist politics, from the Greek crisis to Brexit. Montgomery's broader project is to understand how bureaucrats attempt to craft a pan-European identity and how they deal with the inherent difficulties in pinning down what this "Europeanness" means in practice - especially under circumstances where each bureaucrat was socialized by national-level institutions. His paper highlighted the importance of taking seriously what bureaucrats think and say about themselves, and what we can learn about their process of identity formation in so doing.

[Bernardo Zacka](#) gave a paper about informal taxonomies on the front lines of welfare service provision in a large city in the Northeast United States. A political theorist by training, Zacka became interested in what the bureaucrat's ways of classifying different clients and their problems can tell us about democratic accountability and justice in the provision of services to the citizenry. Zacka concluded that while the discretion allowed to bureaucrats in the exercise of their profession is difficult to monitor according to a stringent abstract standard of democracy, their moral labour is still imperative to the everyday functioning of state institutions. This labour allows them, among other things, to develop self-justifications about the conduct of their work under conditions where the needs of all clients cannot possibly be satisfied, given an underfinanced and understaffed



administration. Zacka's argument is detailed in more depth in his recent book, *When the State Meets the Street*.

Julie Billaud presented on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in Geneva, an official monitoring process within the United Nations human rights system instituted to give all UN member states some feedbacks on their human rights record by fellow nations. With great attention to the work of interns within the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights – including the anthropologist herself – in compiling comprehensive “country reports” about each participating delegation, Billaud highlighted the opportunities and constraints afforded to civil society organizations by a formulaic reporting process in order to ascertain human rights violations. The voices of all stakeholders are mediated by rigid linguistic rules, endless streams of paper, rigorous administrative procedures, and international civil servants working within the United Nations. With echoes from Zacka's paper, Billaud highlighted the importance of the bureaucrat's ethical labour, with an added attention to the material mediations in the bureaucratic process itself, emphasizing the invisible technical skills and affective labour behind the crafting of depersonalized documents.

Marie Alauzen gave a final talk on recent efforts to modernize online state administration in France, based on a case study dealing with the design and implementation of a platform called “FranceConnect”. Inspired by Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) allowing users on any third-party website to verify their identity by logging via Facebook or Google for example, FranceConnect allows clients to access all administrative websites at once without logging in with separate credentials registered with different institutions each time. With a strong grounding in recent works on the state in French science and technology studies (e.g. Muniesa & Linhardt 2009, Linhardt 2012), Alauzen explained how FranceConnect's emergence can be understood as a “trial for the state”, a moment where the state's very existence – in this case, its online control over user identities – is put in question until it reacts through certain socio-technical arrangements and becomes describable in the process. In addition to its theoretical depth, Alauzen's presentation was a sobering reminder of the



importance of engaging with scholarship beyond the English-speaking world, not least because it enriches existing conversations about the anthropology of bureaucracy in Anglo-American circles with novel case studies and theoretical insights (see, e.g., Muzzopappa & Villalta 2011, Ferreira & Nadai 2015).

[Nayanika Mathur](#) was scheduled to give a talk developing some key points in her recent prize-winning monograph, *Paper Tiger*, but it was cancelled due to the ongoing University and College Union (UCU) strike over announced pension cuts to the University Superannuation Scheme (USS) in the United Kingdom. This unexpected ending to the seminar series is a fitting reminder that the bureaucratic structures of governance examined by anthropologists all over the world bear similarities to the ones managing the anthropologist's own workplaces. The muddle generated by the cuts and ensuing strike acts as an invitation to clarify the ways in which university bureaucracies impact scholarly work and constrain knowledge production. An anthropology of bureaucracy that does not engage in this work of clarification and comparison will risk establishing exceptions where there might be, in effect, common mechanisms of authority and control.

[Featured image](#) (cropped) by Samuel Zeller ([unsplash.com](#))

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