

Book Review

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The Utopia of Rules on Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy

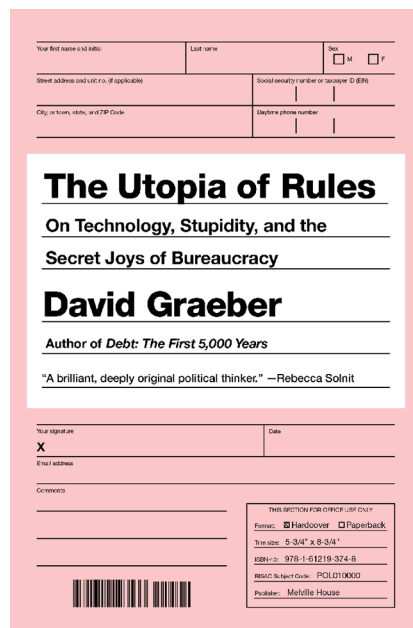
by: David Graeber

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Book presentation from the publishers' website

Where does the desire for endless rules, regulations, and bureaucracy come from? How did we come to spend so much of our time filling out forms? And is it really a cypher for state violence?

To answer these questions, the anthropologist David Graeber – one of our most important and provocative thinkers – traces the peculiar and unexpected ways we relate to bureaucracy today, and reveals how it shapes our lives in ways we may not even

notice...though he also suggests that there may be something perversely appealing – even romantic – about bureaucracy.

Leaping from the ascendance of right-wing economics to the hidden meanings behind Sherlock Holmes and Batman, *The Utopia of Rules* is at once a powerful work of social theory in the tradition of Foucault and Marx, and an entertaining reckoning with popular culture that calls to mind Slavoj Žižek at his most accessible.

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Chapter contents

In the introductory chapter entitled “*The Iron Law of Liberalism and the Era of Total Bureaucratization*” the author opens up the discussion about bureaucratic practices, habits and sensibilities that as he states “*everyone of us is facing*” and highlights the need to find a way to talk about the origins of bureaucracy and its status quo. He underlines the need to understand not only the violence that bureaucracy entails but also what is appealing about it, what sustains it. He also describes the book as a collection of essays, each of which points to some directions that a left-wing critique of bureaucracy might take. The first focuses on violence; the second, on technology; the third, on rationality and value.

Chapter 1, “*Dead Zones of the Imagination An Essay on Structural Stupidity*” has as a starting point the fact that bureaucratic practices and requirements have populated all phases of our everyday lives at such a point that “*we can barely see them – or worse, cannot imagine doing things any other way*”. The author makes the distinction between the notion of “*poetic technologies*” referring to the use of rational, technical, bureaucratic means to bring wild, impossible fantasies to life and “*bureaucratic technologies*” defining the administrative imperatives that have become not the means, but the end of technological development. He concludes that in order to react to this bureaucratic overload we need to radically rethink and break up existing bureaucratic structures. Under this angle, the author questions the nature even of capitalism as inimical to bureaucracy.

In chapter 2, “*Of Flying Cars and the Declining Rate of Profit*”, Graeber presents a personal narration of a family incident and then argues on the power of bureaucracy which lies in its effectiveness according to Weber and Foucault. He explores the notion of structural violence as a foundation of bureaucratic procedures. This approach explains how bureaucracy has come to pervade every aspect of our lives, and why we do not notice it.

Chapter 3, entitled “*The Utopia of Rules, or Why We Really Love Bureaucracy After All*” focuses on analysing the argument that the experience of operating within a system of formalised rules and regulations, under hierarchies of impersonal officials, holds to some extent a kind of covert appeal. That is according to the author because of the capacity or at least civic perception that bureaucratic framing could reduce all forms of power to a set of clear and transparent rules. Still, in practical terms, the bureaucracy has been the primary means by which a tiny percentage of the population extracts wealth from the rest of it, whereas the pursuit of freedom from arbitrary power simply ends up producing more arbitrary power.

Finally, in an appendix entitled “*On Batman and the Problem of Constituent Power*”, Graeber is providing a piece from the Christopher Nolan film *The Dark Knight Rises* in order to further highlight and stress his argumentation on the themes of sovereignty and popular culture and politics. Public affairs are inherently violent changes per se. As the author states, “*True, the system is corrupt, but it’s all we have, and anyway, figures of authority can be trusted if they have first been chastened and endured terrible suffering.*”

Significance for the state of research and practice

Having as a starting point the fact that we no longer like to think about bureaucracy although it informs every aspect of our existence, Graeber questions its nature, discusses the reasons behind its flourishing and finally presents his arguments that bureaucracy can or should be considered as a cypher for state violence.

But why did a society create an entity we call the bureaucracy? According to Riley and Brophy-Baermann (2006), the existence of a large and complex bureaucracy is driven by necessity, that is, by the need for knowledge, as a lot of people know lots of highly specialised things and bureaucracy’s role in the policy process is centered around those people and how they use what they know.

But what about effectiveness in terms of responsiveness, respect of rights of individuals and accountability? As an anthropologist, an anarchist and Occupy Wall Street activist Graeber’s aim is not only to start a conversation on the pros and cons of bureaucracy but to describe how bureaucratisation brings the threat of violence (through legal and police enforcement) into almost every aspect of daily life in wealthy countries. He even goes a step further referring to the contemporary era that he describes as the “*age of total bureaucratization*”, and highlights the boundaries that this development poses to human creativity, imagination, even self-governance.

However, although the idea of self-governance has most often been related to the existence of representative institutions, how can we delegate the task of governing to institutions, even institutions created for that purpose, and still say to be governing ourselves (Riley and Brophy-Baermann, 2006) remains an issue to be resolved.

Graeber also questions the technological progress that is not speeding up but slowing down: the internet is considered a “*super-fast ... combination of library, post office and mail order catalogue*”, and a bureaucratic environment has developed in which only technologies that are “*immediately marketable*” can flourish.

Adopting the terminology of nations of clerks (Saval, 2014), the author opens the way for further exploring issues such as public responsive listening, in order to adapt and apprehend the nuances of personal needs for information and service, as well as for a new discussion on the interrelation between technology and bureaucracy. According to Kim et al. (2014), technology and bureaucracy exert significant influence on the

effectiveness and structural changes that result from IT. These results have implications; IT introduction can affect the structural characteristics of bureaucracy.

The pressures generated by technological progress are helping to transform old bureaucratic structures and corresponding processes (Argyriades, 2010, p.290). This would be very helpful for 'street-level' bureaucrats, namely "*public service workers who interact with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work*" (Lipsky, 1980).

Lipsky suggests that decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish, and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressure, effectively become the public policies they carry out. According to Buffat (2015), even if there is a reduction or disappearance of frontline policy discretion, technologies do not cease to provide frontline workers and citizens with additional action resources. This exact aspect should be further explored as a potential remedy to the state violence that Graeber directly links to bureaucracy.

Last but not least, Graeber's work also opens up the way for future research of social, cognitive, emotional as well as technological aspects of bureaucracy, as the degree of change in the structural characteristics of bureaucracy may depend on public employees' perception and interpretation of IT use (Kim et al., 2014).

Significance for managers and instructors

Graeber's *Utopia of Rules*, opening up the discussion on how people 'relate to' and are influenced by bureaucracies, emphasises the need of limiting bureaucracy in the public sector in order not to hamper creativity. The author argues that the '*order and regularity*' of bureaucracy is more harmful than valuable, and elaborates that rules do not apply equally in practice and comprise more often than not "*instruments through which the human imagination is smashed and shattered*". He focuses more on the political implications of bureaucracy with an anti-capitalist point of view considering that the "*Right, at least, has a critique of bureaucracy. It's not a very good one. But at least it exists. The Left has none.*" Graeber considers bureaucracy as a limitation to self-expression and self-regulation, hindering civic collective intelligence and imagination.

Starting from the paradox that government policies intending to reduce government interference in the economy actually end up producing more regulations, more bureaucrats, and more police, he explores the "*age of total bureaucratization*" and opens a new perspective of discussing how state violence may be lined up with bureaucracy.

From an academic and research perspective, therefore, the book offers an excellent starting point for those interested in innovative interdisciplinary views (drawing on areas such as political science, social science, anthropology, political sociology, political communication, public governance, psychology) to approach bureaucracy in the public sector.

At the same time, *Utopia of Rules* stays accessible to a broader constituency (journalists, public servants, managers and IT consultants), as well as general readers interested in public affairs, as a helpful lens towards a comprehensive understanding of how street-level bureaucracy could or should be treated. According to Durbin's (2015) bureaucratic politics model, actors will pursue policies that benefit the organisations they represent rather than national or collective interests, as often stated in a relevant motto: "*where you stand depends on where you sit*".

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