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# Book review

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Stewart Clegg, Martin Harris and Harro Höpfl (2011).  
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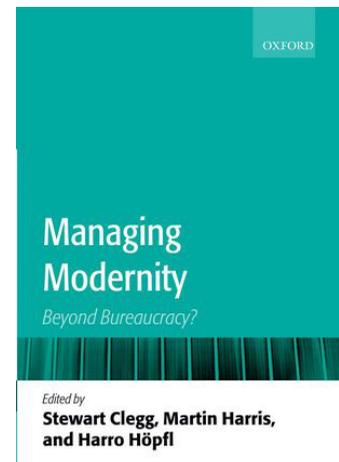
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## Bureaucracy and Beyond

Kafka's novel *The Castle* recounts the story of an unlikely business trip. A land surveyor named K. is summoned to a small provincial town which is ruled over by the shadowy occupants of a castle on its outskirts. On arrival, K. is told that he has been erroneously summoned to the village. Being very diligent, K. tries in vain to gain access to his contact in *the castle*, but this proves very difficult and K. must stay in the town. During this stay, he finds that the castle seems to be ruled over by a set of indecipherable rules and regulations which pervade the life of the village. What is most surprising is that the occupants of this shadowy castle are almost never seen. The villagers hold the bureaucratic castle in high regard, but it remains utterly imperceptible. At the end of the novel, despite his ongoing attempts to enter the castle and fathom its operations, K. remains locked out. For some, The Castle is a stark reminder that our quest for God is ultimately a doomed enterprise, but for others, it reminds us that our inaccessible modern god is, in fact, bureaucracy. Our holy texts are the endless rules and files that govern our lives. Our priests are the shadowy bureaucrats who administer those files. Despite our best efforts to understand all of this, there is no sense to be found. This means that bureaucracy becomes an object of awe and hatred in equal measure.

In many ways, Kafka's novel captures the fantasies and fears surrounding bureaucracy during the 20th century. The author offers us an insight into the existential costs of living a life which is dominated and infused by fathomless rules and regulations,; which become difficult to bear over time; indeed, it was these existential concerns that sparked, for instance, the anti-bureaucratic movements of the late 20th century. Such movements began with a left-leaning emancipatory critique of bureaucracy (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006). The argument was that the unprecedented spread of bureaucracies created 'one-dimensional' people whose lives were devoid of meaning and purpose. Bureaucracies were seen to stifle creativity, freedom, equality, political activity and



even moral reasoning. It followed that the only way to lead an authentic and full life was to escape this stifling bureaucracy and create a more complete life outside the bureau. This led to a whole series of organizational experiments in non-bureaucratic modes of organizing such as communes and co-operatives. It also resulted in the spread of a virulent strain of anti-bureaucratic discourse.

While many experiments with non-bureaucratic organizing were fairly short-lived, anti-bureaucratic discourse proved to be far more influential. It was taken up by all manner of people who remained suspicious of the influence of bureaucracies. Some were (former) leftists who had experienced the non-bureaucratic movements of the 1960s and 1970s. They sought to transplant the principles which they had learned from social movements into formal institutions. Alongside this group of former leftists, however, was another group which was even more enthusiastic about anti-bureaucratic discourse. These were businesspeople, advisors, economists and politicians who were deeply influenced by neo-liberal thinking. Their firm belief in heroic individual entrepreneurs and profound revulsion at socialist-style state involvement provided a perfect ideological backdrop for the enthusiastic embrace of anti-bureaucratic discourse. For them, bureaucracy was one of the central problems of the time. It was stifling market forces, creating inefficiencies and constraining individuals from expressing their choices through consumption or entrepreneurial activities. Bureaucracy was a dead hand which should be amputated and replaced with the great invisible hand of the market.

Left-leaning activists and right-leaning neo-liberals undoubtedly make strange bed-fellows. While they might not have agreed on much, they did share a common distaste for bureaucracy, and this created the appropriate ideological conditions for widespread attempts to smash bureaucracy from the 1980s onwards. Often this message was pushed by increasingly authoritarian ruling groups who hoped forcefully to replace state bureaucracies with market mechanisms. Such forceful action was supported, however, by widespread anti-bureaucratic discourse which fuelled a change in the very language and habits of public administrators. In Anglo-Saxon countries, this process began in earnest during the early 1980s; it then spread rapidly throughout the rest of the world. The result has been for bureaucracy to be blamed for almost every social malady, including poor health care, undereducated students and ineffective policing. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, recently attributed the widespread rioting in London to a 'moral collapse' which has been brought on by a 'bossy bureaucratic state' (*Economist*, 2011). Such violent reactions to bureaucracy have gone hand-in-hand with the explosion of various new organizational forms. Initially, these were largely based on market-oriented entrepreneurial principles (du Gay, 1996), but increasingly they have sought to incorporate network-based motifs (Davies and Spicer, forthcoming).

## The End of Bureaucracy?

With the ascendancy of entrepreneurial sentiment and a network orientation, 'bureaucracy' has become a dirty word. Saying that you think bureaucracy is a good idea is almost like admitting that you consider Sarah Palin to be a great intellectual of our time or that you relish the food served in English University canteens. However, there is a small but growing group of scholars who have sought to challenge anti-bureaucratic sentiments. Perhaps the best-known of these challenges has been put forward by Paul du Gay (eg. 2000, 2005). In an ongoing project, du Gay has mounted a rousing normative defence of bureaucracy. He has pointed out that bureaucracies are not the kind of moral vacuum that many critics claim. Rather, they are premised on a bureaucratic ethos of due process, neutrality and rationality. He argues that in this age of networks and marketization initiatives, a bureaucratic ethos is something we should hold on to. This is because it is a guarantee of procedural justice, rational deliberation and social order. The grounds for this claim become clear if we consider recent public policy disasters such as the 'Coalition of the Willing's' misadventures in Iraq. Looking at this military engagement, we notice that the bureaucratic ethos of due process was pushed aside in favour of an ethos of strident commitment, irrational enthusiasm and a lack of due consideration. Proper bureaucratic procedures were often pushed aside in favour of taking rash action. The military engagement in Iraq is not an isolated incident, however. There are many other instances in the public, private and non-profit sectors where the absence or suppression of a bureaucratic ethos has laid the foundations for administrative disasters. For instance, many of the problems associated with the financial crisis were partially rooted in the suspension of bureaucratic consideration in favour of entrepreneurial activity. Similarly, a number of high-profile scandals relating to the failure of UK government authorities to detect cases of child abuse have uncovered the widespread suspension of bureaucratic processes in the wake of post-bureaucratic restructuring. The central message is that we drop the bureaucratic ethos at our own peril.

Alongside arguments for the importance of an ethos of bureaucracy, a growing group of scholars have posited the idea that post-bureaucratic rhetoric masks a very different reality. In particular, they have questioned the claim that bureaucracy has disappeared in recent years by highlighting the stubborn endurance of bureaucratic structures. One exemplar of this argument is the work of David Courpasson (eg. 2000). He points out that in many large organizations, we have witnessed not the decline of bureaucracy as such but rather the fusing of bureaucratic and entrepreneurial orientations; this has produced so-called 'soft bureaucracies'. In the contemporary organization, bureaucratic rules and processes remain in place. In some cases they are actually extended through various standardization processes, the introduction of IT systems and so on. However, these bureaucratic mechanisms become a set of resources that senior soft bureaucrats use to exert power and further their own career. What is crucial for Courpasson is the fact that

hierarchy has not disappeared. Rather, it has actually become more pronounced. This is because organizational delayering has increasingly stripped out middle management and created a stark separation between a soft bureaucratic elite and those whom that elite seeks to control. Courpasson reminds us that bureaucracy has taken on a new guise of flexible structures dominated by an elite which uses those structures to advance its own power.

Taken together, these two streams of work have called into question anti-bureaucratic discourse by showing that bureaucracy is not necessarily declining and that such a decline would in any case not necessarily be a good thing. It is against this background that a recent edited collection has appeared. In *Managing Modernity: Beyond Bureaucracy?*, we find a group of scholars who are all clearly suspicious of anti-bureaucratic sentiments. The initial question which they pose is whether we are witnessing the end of bureaucracy. All contributors to this collection come up with the same resounding answer to this provocative question: 'No!' To come to this conclusion the contributors draw on various mixtures of three core critiques of anti-bureaucratic discourse. They put forward ethical arguments for the importance of a bureaucratic ethos. For instance, Paul du Gay's chapter mounts a defence of the importance of the bureaucracy ethos of neutrality in the face of increasing calls for public administrators to develop an ethos of enthusiasm for policies. Harro Höpfl argues that the decline of bureaucracy has led to a dangerous threat to the bureaucratic ethos of accountability. In his chapter, Hugh Willmott also points towards the moral bases of bureaucracy by making an appeal to notions of adjustment, conviction and responsibility. The contributors also put forward empirical arguments against the post-bureaucratic thesis. These typically highlight how bureaucratic mechanisms continue to characterize organizational life, albeit in new forms. An example of such claims is Buchanan and Fitzgerald's chapter on the English National Health Service, where they point out the rise of new bureaucratic mechanisms under the guise of 'networks'. Finally, the contributors offer evaluative arguments about the relative importance of bureaucracy, asking what happens where bureaucracies have indeed disappeared; the answer, they suggest, is the appearance of increasingly brittle and unstable organizations. For instance, Stephen Ackroyd points out that debureaucratization processes have involved a hollowing-out of the English company. In his chapter, he traces how post-bureaucratization programmes have resulted in English companies' becoming little more than shells which are used by owners to pursue their financial interests and participate in the market for companies. Taken together, these arguments lead to a remarkably uniform set of conclusions: we are witnessing not the death of bureaucracy but rather the appearance of new forms of bureaucracies. These new forms of bureaucracy bring with them a new set of problems, such as increasingly brittle organizations and a decline of neutrality and rationality. To address these concerns, it is necessary to revive or reform the bureaucratic ethos.

## Rethinking Bureaucracy

The authors of *Managing Modernity* certainly provide us with some answers about the state of bureaucracy in the early 21st century. They put forward a strong case according to which bureaucracy continues to be an influential and important mode of organizing. In this sense, the book provides further confirmation for the lines of argument set out by Paul du Gay (2000) and David Courpasson (2000). However, the contributors to *Managing Modernity* also pose some novel questions. In particular, many of them ask how we might think about these reformed bureaucracies which dominate today's organizational landscape. The contributors try to grapple with those bureaucracies that seem to incorporate elements of flexibility, markets, networks, entrepreneurialism, community engagement, virtuality and all manner of other management and public policy fashions. They put forward a number of new concepts in an effort to think through these reformed bureaucracies. Stewart Clegg's chapter provides a useful overview of some of the concepts which have been commonly used to understand 'post-bureaucracies'. He also suggests that projects are increasingly used as core organizing units in these neo-bureaucracies. David Buchanan and Louise Fitzgerald suggest the notion of accessorized bureaucracy as a way of capturing bureaucratic structures which add on various aspects of markets, networks and community orientation to a bureaucratic core. By embracing this idea, contemporary bureaucracies can build a degree of legitimacy. Looking at the case of the NHS, David Speed suggests that the idea of 'soft bureaucracy' may correspond to the NHS reforms, which have been driven by attempts to introduce choice-based policies. Another consideration of the NHS, by Martin Harris, finds that notions of network governance have been used to supplement existing bureaucratic procedures. This theme of networks is expanded on by Jannis Kallinikos, who highlights how many bureaucratic processes have been increasingly driven into virtual networks. In some cases, online communities and virtual production networks have taken on many of the administrative tasks usually undertaken by bureaucratic administrators. Mats Alvesson and Dan Kärreman argue that two management consultancies which claimed to be paragons of post-bureaucracy actually relied on heavy bureaucratic measures (particularly personnel management systems); these bureaucratic systems often worked not to ensure that employees followed the rules but to encourage aspirational control which would tether employees to the company. In this sense, rules and regulations come to infuse the life-world and identity projects of people within the firm. To capture this, they suggest the concept of 'sociocracy'. Finally, Mike Reed puts forward the idea of bureaucratic hybrids as a way of conveying new modes of control in contemporary organizations.

These attempts to capture the nature of neo-bureaucracies certainly make some headway. They point to the continued presence of a bureaucratic core, but also note that there have been some changes to the way which this bureau operates. However, these chapters do

not manage to establish how the reconstruction of bureaucracy has involved not just changing its internal workings but also transforming its relationship with the external world. Many of the chapters point out that transformations of bureaucracies are partially symbolic attempts to build legitimacy with increasingly anti-bureaucratic audiences. They also note that the boundaries of neo-bureaucracies are increasingly flexible and porous. A whole range of gaseous, ephemeral, liquid and fleeting metaphors are used. However, the chapters in *Managing Modernity* do not really pursue the implications of these increasingly porous boundaries and the widespread 'out-sourcing' of bureaucracy (not just to companies but also increasingly to citizens and other users of the bureaucracy themselves). Perhaps that which comes closest to achieving this is Kallinkos's discussion of the role of open-source communities. If we really mean to understand how these new forms of bureaucracy operate, however, we must understand how they try to harness the world beyond the bureau. In an attempt to further this line of enquiry, I would argue that neo-bureaucracies work through the creation of extitutions.

#### Extitutions

The concept of the extitution was first posited by Michel Serres (1994). He used it to refer to forms of control which no longer have a strict place or setting, but rather come to be distributed or spread throughout a society (for more detailed discussion, see Tirdaro and Domènech, 2001, cf. Spicer, 2010). 'Extitution' refers to a form of authority where there is no inside and outside. There are no walls to this bureau. Rather, relationships of administrative authority spread throughout society in various networks and other flexible structures. An extitution is a particular type of bureaucratic arrangement whereby services are no longer provided within a strictly bounded space. Rather, service provision becomes infused into all aspects of society. This can be seen in forms of deinstitutionalization, whereby various social services are no longer provided within the walls of a strictly bounded institution, but are distributed throughout society, with responsibility for this being largely placed on communities (Vitores, 2002). Some instances of this include the closure of asylums, the rise of 'care in the community', the increase of prisoners being placed under community supervision, and patients being pushed out of hospitals into virtual healthcare networks (eg. Milligan, Roberts and Mort, 2011). All these de-institutionalized settings share a lack of any strict division between what is inside and outside the bureaucratic institution; the bureaucracy seems to exist everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

Extitutions do not strictly work through rules, regulations and procedures. Rather, they seek to work through people's everyday lives: through their interests, passions, identities and so on. Many of the contributions to *Managing Modernity* note that neo-bureaucracies focus significantly on public involvement. Being involved, engaged, enthusiastic and ever present have become watchwords for the contemporary

bureaucrat. These neo-bureaucrats are asked to bring their lives (private passions and personal identity) to work, but the blurring of boundaries does not end there. As well as bringing life into bureaucracy, we have witnessed processes where bureaucracy has begun to infuse certain aspects of life. Instead of entrusting our health or emotional well-being to institutional clinics, we are asked to manage them ourselves through careful self-monitoring. Bureaucracy has increasingly taken root in our everyday lives.

Nowhere is this everyday bureaucracy more evident, perhaps, than in the amazing popularity of the best-selling self-help book of the last decade: *The Rules* (Fein and Schneider, 1995). What this provided was a series of apparently simple instructions which women were instructed to follow to the letter in order to woo and cope with pathetic men. Much of the advice contained in the work could be found in nearly any self-help book with the same target audience. However, what made this book so popular was that the advice in question was not provided in the same kind of new-age pragmatic tone so typical of self-help works ('accept yourself first and then you will unleash your inner power', etc). Rather, it adopted an authoritarian tone which clearly appealed to many readers. The advice offered consisted of rules based on universal laws of nature, and they simply must be followed if the reader wanted to have a hope of achieving a meaningful love life. These included rules like 'don't talk to a man first', 'don't call him and rarely return his calls', 'don't rush into sex; wait until at least the third date', and, of course, 'don't break the rules'. There is no self-exploration here; just good, old-fashioned compliance with disembodied authority. This simple tone proved to be so popular that follow-up 'Rules' appeared on topics like marriage and even management.

*The Rules* may just be one self-help series, but it reflects a broader form of contemporary authority which seeks to create strict, self-imposed rules and careful self-administration. Consider the type of activities which are increasingly undertaken in the field of personal health (Metzl and Kirkland, 2010). Here, the responsibility of health shifts from formal institutions, such as hospitals staffed with various health professionals, to individuals. Citizens are asked to monitor their own health and ensure that various rules and regulations are followed ('don't smoke', 'don't eat too much fat', 'exercise', etc). Various bureaucratic authorities surely play a role here. They seek to encourage individuals to engage in self-administration through mechanisms which are legal (such as smoking bans), technical (such as wearing a pedometer) and therapeutic (such as setting health goals and monitoring these with a therapist) in nature. This kind of self-administration has become increasingly common in other spheres, including education (where students are asked to choose their own courses, set learning goals, engage in self-directed learning, etc.), justice (where conflicting parties are encouraged to engage in alternative dispute resolution), culture (where communities are asked to engaged in the production and expression of their culture), and the environment (where individuals are asked to

take responsibility for environmental preservation through recycling and other eco-conscious behaviour).

The most recent unfolding of this process can be found in a recent policy platform of the conservative government in the UK. They have suggested that we need to engage in the construction of a 'Big Society' in the place of 'Big Government'. This wonderfully vague slogan is used to express a broad policy that will 'create a climate that empowers local people and communities, building a big society that will 'take power away from politicians and give it to people' (H. M. Government, 2010). Such calls for the Big Society sound very similar to calls by the earlier conservative Thatcher government for a roll-back of the state. For the Big Society was mooted at the very moment when UK public services were facing some of the largest funding cuts in their history. The notion is based on the retreat of state-delivered services (and presumably various debureaucratization programmes). However, the discourse of the Big Society is not infused with the same kind of zeal for entrepreneurialism which can be found in earlier neo-liberal policies. Rather, appeals are made to community involvement, voluntarism and active citizenship. State bureaucracies should not (just) be replaced by entrepreneurial start-ups; they should also be replaced by self-servicing community groups. One case which was often given to illustrate the promise of the Big Society agenda was the reform of public libraries. Promoters argued that instead of being administered by a government bureaucracy (the community library services of local councils), they could be run by local communities (Flood, 2010). The ideal image underpinning the Big Society agenda is not a budding entrepreneur; rather, it is the bucolic tight-knit rural community of Ambridge which features on the long-running UK radio drama *The Archers* (Raban, 2010). Such high-performance communities would effectively become public service providers. In this sense, the bureaucracy would no longer be taken over by corporations but run by community groups.

Policies such as the Big Society are explicitly aimed at doing away with bureaucracies. However, rather than completely dispelling bureaucracy, what they actually do is engage citizens in their own administration. Despite nearly three decades of anti-bureaucratic rhetoric and repeated debureaucratization programmes, we are faced with no fewer rules, regulations, systems, and procedures. In fact, there are perhaps more rules to be grappled with (particularly with the expansion of various global standards, quasi-government regulation and micro-regulations). The only difference is that instead of being administered by a public agency, this great bureaucratic apparatus is outsourced. In some cases various shady private or non-government organizations take on the mantle of bureaucratic administration. But in other cases bureaucratic processes, rules and procedure become increasingly self-administered. We become bureaucrats for and of ourselves. When we begin to adopt a mantle of self-administration, a kind of collapse of the life-world and the systems world takes place. Bureaucracy begins to know no bounds and becomes ever-present, infusing all aspects

of life and often working through them. In the words of Peter Fleming (forthcoming), it becomes a kind of 'biocracy' that seeks to control and modulate life itself. We become our own biocrats, with the primary task of self-administering our own lives.

At a superficial level, neo-bureaucratic self-administration addresses many of the classical problems that plague the bureau: inefficiencies are reduced by leaner organizations, inflexibility is addressed through a greater change orientation, morally problematic behaviour is dealt with by encouraging greater community participation and alienation is addressed by allowing employees to bring their whole sense of being to work. However, many of these alleged benefits of bureaucracy have proved to be rather under-developed in practice. For instance, the distribution of services to community groups often increases inefficiencies which might be gained through the mass provision of services. But what is striking is that the spread of self-administration gives rise to new problems. Du Gay has already highlighted the problems which come with an ethos of enthusiasm. However, another issue which du Gay does not touch on is '(over-)saturation'. By this we mean that when people are constantly called upon to engage in self-administration, bureaucracy processes come to saturate all aspects of life. While modern institutions focused administration within the walls of the bureau, the propagation of extitutions projects bureaucratic procedures throughout all aspects of life. Our daily routines become a site for self-monitoring our health. Our private engagements and friendships become a potential site for community mobilization. Our sense of identity becomes something to be harnessed in the administration of culture. The result is that our entire lives becomes loaded with demands to be involved: we should be involved in our health, our welfare, our communities, our education and so on. Perhaps this reaches a kind of crescendo with Big-Society-style policies which ask us not only to pay our taxes but also to club together to provide the very services which these taxes are supposed to fund. The result is that our lives become saturated with constant demands to be involved. This comes at the very time when employers' expectations regarding our involvement in the workplace have also increased significantly. This means that people's lives become increasingly saturated with demands to be constantly involved and active in everything from managing one's weight to running one's local library. The demands of (hyper-)active citizens may seem to be reasonable to some; however, they come at a high cost. Constant activity shifts the expectations from the bureau itself onto the individual, but as Kafka was all too aware, bureaucratic expectations are unending. The result is that even the most diligent of self-administering individuals finds it difficult to keep up. When this happens, self-administrators have no-one to blame but themselves. Such blame is then frequently directed internally and can often transform into a pervasive sense of guilt (Spicer, 2011), anxiety (Salecl, 2006) or even depression (Ehrenberg, 2010).

The problems associated with neo-bureaucratic self-administration

clearly call for different forms of political engagement. Resistance to modern bureaucracies has often been mobilized through calls to replace cold instrumental reason with true and meaningful human connections. However, the over-saturated neo-bureaucracies which we see today call for precisely the opposite reaction. Rather than creating more connections, perhaps the central task of resistance movements is one of disconnection. This would involve seeking to disconnect our everyday lives from the administrative apparatus which tries to work through them. In recent years, a range of different strategies of disconnection have been suggested. For instance, Paul du Gay has sought to revive existing modes of disconnection found in classical bureaucratic thought. He makes an argument for the dissociation of political and administrative power. He also makes an argument for a distinction between one's own private interests and the various projects which are rationally pursued as part of a bureaucratic apparatus. We could easily imagine taking this call for disconnection further by seeking a stricter separation between our private lives and the demands of the bureau (the slogan being 'you are not your work'). We might even imagine more radical forms of disconnection whereby people would ultimately seek to withdraw from the self-administrative apparatus. This is perhaps represented nowhere better than in the manifesto of the shadowy French activist group called The Invisible Committee (2009). In this short document they put forward a sketch of a kind of post-connection politics based on complete withdrawal from various types of administrative apparatus. This kind of withdrawal can take on the radical form of living outside the various demands for participation. But this spirit of disconnection seems replete in many workplaces where employees respond to neo-bureaucracies by simply leaving them. In some cases, it may involve actually exiting the organization (through 'down-shifting', for instance), but it also may involve a psychological and emotional exit from the organization. In some of the most extreme and indeed pathological cases in recent years, it has led some employees in companies like FoxCon and France Telecom to think the only way to exit was to end their lives (Cederström and Fleming, 2011). The fact that people would rather stop existing than continue to participate shows us that something is seriously wrong.

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