

Culture and admin

Béatrice Hibou, *La bureaucratisation du monde à l'ère néolibérale*, La Découverte, Paris, 2012. 223 pp., €17.00 pb., 978 2 70717 439 0.

Ben Kafka, *The Demon of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork*, Zone Books, New York, 2012. 182 pp., £19.95 hb., 978 1 93540 826 0.

The ascendancy of neoliberalism was accompanied by all sorts of mendacious advertising for the roll-back of the state. Bureaucracy became a byword for everything oppressive, rigid and inefficient about the planner-state, everything that marketization promised to dissolve into supple flows and individual solutions. The opposition of market and state is so entrenched that awareness of the grotesquely bureaucratic character of neoliberal capital still has some difficulty in making inroads into our common sense. Yet our everyday life is in many ways permeated by procedures, interactions and interfaces that are demonstrably bureaucratic, by what Béatrice Hibou captures as a 'normative inflation'.

Hibou begins her helpful survey of the return of neoliberalism's repressed with the chronicle of a day in the life and work of French nurse Alice, in the absurdist 'wonderland' of infinite auditing, relentless form-filling and automated calls. There is tedium and comedy in these tales, gruellingly familiar as they are. There is also what Ben Kafka – who delights in recounting the tragicomedies of bureaucracy that accompanied its revolutionary apotheosis in France – identifies as a compensatory 'satisfaction': the dark pleasure we take in retelling our personal calvary with paperwork, unable as we are to get what we want from the state. In methodologically and stylistically divergent ways, both these books are preoccupied with the everyday life of abstraction, as well as with our misrecognitions of bureaucracy, and the way in which it parlays ubiquity into invisibility, or occupies the deepest recesses of our psyche. Both inevitably begin with epigrams from Max Weber, grave prophet of bureaucracy's inevitability. Yet their choices are indicative: where Hibou's selection from *Economy and Society* underscores the fusion of bureaucracy and capitalism, Kafka's draws our attention to the 'bureaucratic medium' – the folders, files, the *paperwork*.

A careful synthesizer of a vast range of literatures about the political economy of 'the rule of desks', Hibou takes some inspiration from writers like Rizzi,

Burnham, Crozier and Castoriadis, but especially Claude Lefort, who took the rise of bureaucracy not as a generic index of rationalization and disenchantment, but as a feature of capital. More precisely, it is the optimal social and organizational framework for capital accumulation, permitting, in Lefort's words, an 'immediate socialization of activities and behaviours'. How, then, can we specify the current conjuncture of bureaucratization?

First, the public-private (or state-business) parallelism present in Weber has developed into a *sui generis* hybridization, namely in terms of a hypertrophy in the private production of norms. Much of the book provides a panorama of contemporary research on this phenomenon, from the sociology of quantification to the study of 'audit cultures'. It is punctuated with discussions of various fields and agencies at the forefront of this 'normalization': credit raters, university evaluators, promoters of transparency, food standards regulators, transparency NGOs, the International Organization for Standardization, border agencies, risk assessors of all stripes. Though Hibou's specific references are all tucked away in notes, the commendable effort to cover the gamut of bureaucracy's manifestations, and the range of theoretical perspectives on it, suffers from some of the generality and flat prose that plague the social science literature review.

Second, and key to Hibou's stance, is an intensification of the 'formal' character of bureaucracy. As she writes: 'The process of abstraction and categorization is so advanced and so generalized that it makes one lose the meaning of the mental operations that guide it and tends to assimilate coding and formalization to reality.' This passage encapsulates both the promise and the shortcomings of Hibou's book. To extract bureaucracy from the Weberianism of fools that would see it as a transhistorical fate, and conceive it in terms of the current configuration of capitalist power, requires without doubt a theory of abstraction and formalization. Unfortunately, Hibou's penchant for a *mental* theory of abstraction – which she somewhat

leavens with her advocacy of bureaucratic formalizations as an effective fiction – blocks the path to thinking how the proliferation of modes of ranking, commensuration and evaluation relates to the real abstractions of capital. We are closer here to the early Marx – for whom bureaucracy was an imaginary state alongside the real state – than to the critic of political economy. We are also at some distance from some of the sociological literatures that Hibou relies on, which are increasingly concerned with the complex social assemblages and material constructs necessary to reproduce and make efficacious such fictions as GDP, bond ratings or league tables. Different as their approaches may be, both Marxism and contemporary economic sociology militate against the idea that abstraction is a reduction of complexity, as Hibou seems to suggest, or that they are ‘in reality nothing but codes on which people have ended up agreeing at a given moment to exchange informations, act, orient behaviours, in brief, to govern’ – an exceedingly idealistic image of bureaucracy.

Perhaps not surprisingly, given its attempt to integrate such a range of often incompatible approaches, *The Bureaucratization of the World in the Age of Neoliberalism* can be both theoretically and politically eclectic. Thus its humanist critique of bureaucracy as an imposed abstraction – which finds inspiration in Marcuse’s intuitions about the production of indifference, and takes the form of a defence of the ethics of the *métier* against the domination of homogeneity – is accompanied by a rather more fashionably Foucauldian stress on strategies, on power as the conduct of conduct. The prescriptive tenor of the former sits uneasily with the descriptive distance of the latter, and with the useful reminder of the dialectic between formality and informality, with the one exacerbating the other. Thus, Hibou provides a persuasive argument for the ways in which the capillary diffusion of neoliberal bureaucratic practices (with their hideous newspeak: ‘benchmarking’, ‘best practice’, ‘poverty governance’, etc.) has enforced an inegalitarian paradigm and a concomitant discourse of euphemism, where inequality becomes exclusion, domination unhappiness, injustice suffering and violence trauma. Yet she also wishes to argue that the process of bureaucratization is impelled by ‘popular’ demands for security, by a complicity that is built into procedures that already set out the terms in which they can be contested – through more forms, further committee meetings, more accountability, another audit (of the audit of the audit...). The fact that the book concludes with the call to see bureaucratization

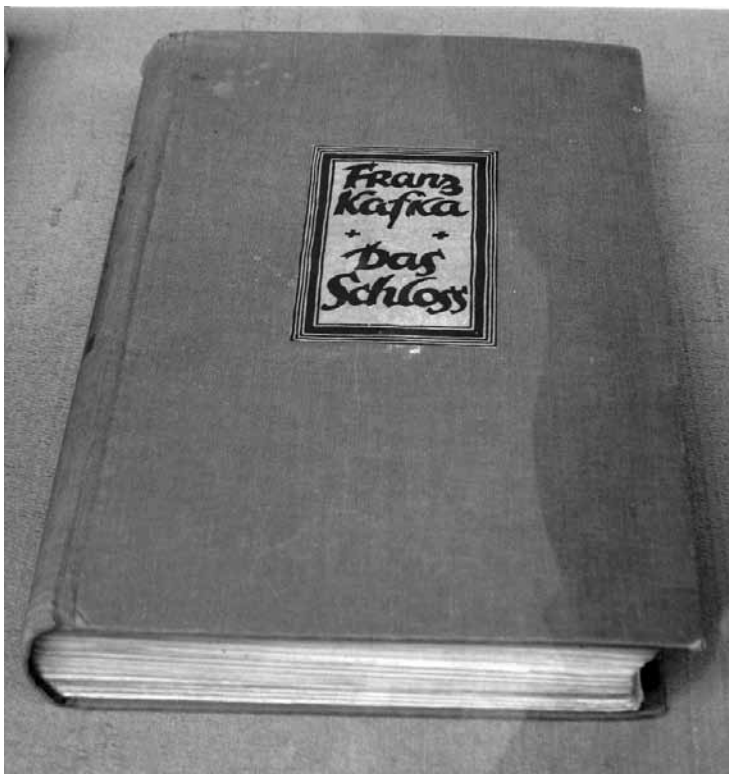
as a ‘space for political practice and a site for the enunciation of politics’ – to abandon the iron cage and embrace the idea of a multiple, plastic, negotiable labyrinth – jars with the moment of denunciation in Hibou’s critique of bureaucratic abstraction.

This tonal and political imbalance, between the description of strategies of power and the indictment of forms of abstract domination, could be generously regarded as a contradiction in the object, as well as an index of our own everyday ambiguities towards different strains of bureaucratization. Yet I think it is also an effect of the profound limitations in Weberian conceptions of abstraction. These incline towards seeing the logics of capital as a product of epochal processes of rationalization, rather than regarding state and market bureaucracies as unstable, conjunctural responses to shifts in economic imperatives, as well as products of the lucid strategies of determinate capitalist agents (from the Mont Pelerin Society to hedge fund managers). The ‘bureaucratic construction of markets’ of which Hibou speaks has little to do with a general process of reduction of complexity – the juxtaposition of a three-bedroom house and an asset-backed derivative might suggest as much – but a lot to do with legal, institutional and political-economic stratagems to extract surplus profit at a period in which other sources of revenue have dried up. I’m not sure if abstraction is the ‘constituent imagination’ of society, but it does seem to be both its symbolic tissue and, in crisis conditions, its real.

Where Hibou seeks to produce a composite sociological picture of bureaucracy’s mutations after the welfare state, Kafka mines the archives and pamphlets of the French Revolution – bureaucracy’s crucible – to illustrate the necessity for theory to tarry with the psychic and material life of paperwork, instead of dismissing it, in the style of ‘paranoid’ criticism, as a mindless Moloch or a conspiracy. Kafka’s inquisitive and ironic prose certainly enacts the satisfactions he argues we all draw from recounting our misadventures in the world of files. His account of a French clerk’s hysterical odyssey through the revolutionary state’s proliferating bureaus, of the subtle exculpations of the accused of Thermidor, or of the mythopoiesis of Labussière – who impaired the Terror by supposedly eating exterminatory verdicts, later to find himself immortalized in Gance’s *Napoléon* – are small triumphs of historical narrative, the comical anecdote well balanced with historical insight. State archives turn into cabinets of curiosities, as we behold fantastic plans for universal filing machines, baroquely ornamented archival juggernauts, imagined in the age of

Encyclopédie, then surpassed in the improvisational chaos of revolutionary rule.

Kafka eschews any historical sociology of the Terror, and does not show sympathies for the Furetian teleologies that would see its invention of the ‘national-security state’ as the matrix for all totalitarianism to come. Nor does he seem to share the enthusiasm for Jacobinism of much contemporary theory: Saint-Just appears here not just as the zealot immortalized in a frame from Gance’s film, but as perhaps the original paranoid enemy of bureaucracy. Calling out for decisive brevity, and seeking to break through what Kafka insightfully portrays as the contradiction between extensive surveillance and intensive acceleration, Saint-Just’s cry against the practico-inertness of paperwork gives the book its title: ‘The demon of writing is waging war against us; we are unable to govern.’ The virtuous terrorist is the legitimate heir of Rousseau, another enemy of files, and Kafka’s emphasis on the ineradicable supplement can be traced back to its Derridean sources. In spite of the levity of Kafka’s touch, the politics of this position are clear. *Différance*, mediation, the comedy of bureaucratic errors, the joys in the failure of paperwork and the inevitability of inscription are an antidote of sorts against a political metaphysics of presence whose epistemology is necessarily paranoid. The Terror’s attempt to dominate (through) paperwork hankered after ‘a much longed-for immediacy, presence, and plenitude of sovereignty against the dangerous supplementarity of paperwork’.



It is not bureaucracy itself, then, but a certain relationship to it – namely the paranoid one – that calls upon the resources of a deflationary critique, one that draws extensively from paperwork’s historical ties to comedy, satire and what Foucault beautifully termed the ‘administrative grotesque’. Some of this takes a genealogical cast. *The Demon of Writing* narrates with dramatic poise the emergence of the idea of accountability – so dismayingly central to the rhetoric of neoliberal bureaucratization – in the dense and hasty debates over Article 16 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. This moment and the ‘radical new ethics of paperwork’ borne by the revolution bear the promise (and the menace) that ‘[s]ociety, every member of society, had the right to keep track of the state and thus to ensure that his interests were being accurately and effectively represented ... paperwork had become a technology of political representation’.

It is here that his tale is closest to classic historical-sociological arguments about the role of the Revolution in state-making and centralization, arguments here explored through Tocqueville’s acknowledgement of ‘administration’ as the critical legacy of 1789. But it also tells us of how the very neologism ‘bureaucracy’ – making its debut in Melchior von Grimm’s 1764 *Correspondance littéraire* – was rarely unaccompanied by sarcastic laments or fiery denunciations; a common target for otherwise hostile parties (conservatives defending custom, liberal paladins of civil society, revolutionary radicals). As Kafka suggests in a more psychoanalytic vein, the symbolic dimension of paperwork (the intelligibility of the world and its functioning) keeps collapsing into the imaginary (attachment and aggression). The satisfactions of all of these complaints, against what Balzac denounced as the ‘power of inertia called the Report’, also served to contain the opposition to bureaucracy, deferring a critique of what Kafka calls ‘the alienation of clerical labour’ (a theme that he alas does not develop). The cry of the beleaguered French clerk, ‘Does truth have departments, where it can be suffocated?’, thus blocks a patient detection of the archive’s aporias.

If political theory’s paranoid proclivity has hindered it from giving its due to the frustrations and unpredictabilities of paperwork, is there a way out beyond the deflations of comedy? I mention the latter because of Kafka’s endorsement of Simon Critchley’s alignment of comedy

on the side of materiality against tragedy's idealism (the deeply material character of modern tragedy evidenced by Sartre or Raymond Williams is ignored). From its tale of Labussière turning terroristic edicts into spitballs to its account of Roland Barthes's index cards, from its defence of close reading to its attention to the tactility of paperwork – culminating in a critique of Timpanaro's dismissal of the Freudian slip, which enjoins the reader of *The Demon of Writing* to photocopy and snip a facsimile of one of Freud's bank withdrawal forms – the book is a committed defence of a scriptural materiality and a certain materialism, one drawn from deconstruction and psychoanalytic theory.

Kafka calls for a theory of paperwork that conjoins praxis and parapraxis. The tutelary figures are Freud and Marx, whose thinking of paperwork is here gleaned from the very margins of their corpus – in the aforementioned slip at the bank, and in the patient excavation of a little-known text of the very early Marx, his 'Justification of the Correspondent from the Mosel'. Kafka confidently tells us that the 'story of Marxist state theory after 1843 is a story of missed opportunities'. It would have been nice to know more about them. He suggests that had Marx persisted with his 'media theory' and not embraced the paranoid critique of bureaucracy voiced in his Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State, his materialism would not have slipped into fantasies of immediacy which neglect the insistence of materiality, and of paperwork in particular.

Yet the mediation that the young, radical-democratic Marx calls for, that of the press, hardly seems adequate to theorizing bureaucracy's psychic life and its political-economic entanglements. Curiously, and unlike Hibou, Kafka seems to retain the anachronistic notion that bureaucracy is fundamentally a matter of the state. And while he mentions it in passing, his facile dismissal of the state's 'smashing' doesn't give its due to the fact that Marx and Engels were hardly partisans of the incineration of files, and might perhaps be faulted for an excessive faith in the necessity of administrative mediation (see Engels's 'On Authority') rather than tritely accused of delusions of transparency. It's a shame that despite his praise for close reading, and his enviable erudition and curiosity, Kafka neglects how large 'paperwork' loomed in the mature Marx, as recorded in this wonderful passage from Paul Lafargue's reminiscences:

in order to write the twenty pages or so on English factory legislation in *Capital* he went through a whole library of *Blue Books* containing reports of commissions and factory Inspectors in England

and Scotland. He read them from cover to cover, as can be seen from the pencil marks in them. He considered those reports as the most important and weighty documents for the study of the capitalist mode of production. He had such a high opinion of those in charge of them that he doubted the possibility of finding in another country in Europe 'men as competent, as free from partisanship and respect of persons as are the English factory inspectors'. He paid them this brilliant tribute in the *Preface to Capital*. From these *Blue Books* Marx drew a wealth of factual information. Many members of Parliament to whom they are distributed use them only as shooting targets, judging the striking power of the gun by the number of pages pierced. Others sell them by the pound, which is the most reasonable thing they can do, for this enabled Marx to buy them cheap from the old paper dealers in Long Acre whom he used to visit to look through their old books and papers. Professor Beesley said that Marx was the man who made the greatest use of English official inquiries and brought them to the knowledge of the world.

Kafka rightly notes how Marx struggled from the start against the 'childish-sensuous materialism' that treats abstractions as mere figments. This was an ambivalent struggle, and Marx often, and sometimes with good reason, vented his wrath against those merely derivative abstractions that dominated and depleted living labour. To call them supplements would make them no more acceptable, nor more necessary. Yet, as Lafargue's passage suggests, this was a struggle in which Marx showed far greater respect for paperwork than his adversaries. The idea of a tragically paranoid Marx, to be leavened by comic materiality or unsettled by parapraxis, is a rather tired legacy of philosophical critiques of Stalinism whose day has long passed. Read alongside Hibou's survey of the contemporary revenge of formalizing power, however, Kafka's accomplished account of the psychic and political life of paperwork provides a fine starting point for truly bringing together the forms of value and the value of forms, in a manner that would be sensitive to the psychopathologies of bureaucracy's everyday life. Such a theory of bureaucracy, which both books invite but do not realize, would not pit materiality and history against an impoverishing abstraction, but account for how material devices of abstraction – all those forms and audits, chits and chads, and now algorithms, servers and databases, about which we entertain fantasies of incineration or deletion – are integral to a society in which abstractions really dominate individuals. Just because you're paranoid, it doesn't mean they aren't after you.

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