Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy

Anarchist anthropologist David Graeber follows up his magesterial [Debt: The First 5000 Years](#) with a [slim, sprightly, acerbic attack on capitalism's love affair with bureaucracy](#), asking why the post-Soviet world has more paperwork, phone-trees and red-tape than ever, and why the Right are the only people who seem to notice or care.

[The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy](#) is only 180 pages long — three essays, an introduction and an afterword — but I made more than 80 notes as I read it, underlining passages and dog-earing pages I wanted to come back to and/or read aloud to other people and talk about further.

Unlike the enormous and comprehensive *Debt*, *Utopia of Rules* is mostly argument, not history. It sets out to investigate the problem of "bureaucracy" — basically, rules, and the simmering threat of violence that underpins them. Hidebound adherence to awful, runaround bureaucracy was always the sin laid at the feet of slow-moving, Stalinist states under the influence of the USSR. Capitalism, we were told, was dynamic, free, and open. But if that's so, why is it that since the USSR imploded, bureaucracy under capitalism has *exploded*? If you live in a western, capitalist state, you probably spend more time filling in paperwork, waiting on hold, resubmitting Web-forms, attending performance reviews, brainstorming sessions, training meetings, and post-mortems than any of your ancestors, regardless of which side of the Iron Curtain they lived on.

Moreover, the anti-authoritarian Left has always had a critique of this kind of hidebound adherence to rules. The left-wing uprisings in 1968 spraypainted walls with "Demand the impossible!" Today, if the Left can critique bureaucracy, it can only do so in the language of the Right: by attacking civil servants and unions, when almost all the red tape you encounter in your daily life comes from trying to get your "free market" HMO to pay up, get your bank to correct its errors — or, if you're unlucky enough to need welfare in America or the UK, from dealing with "accountability" officers, much beloved by the right, who require you to complete paperwork straight out of a USSR-themed Ren Faire, all the time. Sometimes in triplicate.

Bureaucracy is pervasive and metastatic. To watch cop-dramas, you'd think that most of the job of policing was crime-fighting. But it's not. The police are just "armed bureaucrats." Most of what police do is administrative enforcement — making sure you follow the rules (threatening to gas you or hit you with a stick if you don't). Get mugged and chances are, the police will take the report over the phone. Drive down the street without license plates and you'll be surrounded by armed officers of the law who are prepared to deal you potentially lethal violence to ensure that you're not diverging from the rules.

This just-below-the-surface violence is the crux of Graeber's argument. He mocks the academic left who insist that violence is symbolic these days, suggesting that any grad student sitting in a university library reading Foucault and thinking about the symbolic nature of violence should consider the fact that if he'd attempted to enter that same library without a student ID, he'd have been swarmed by armed cops.

Bureaucracy is a utopian project: like all utopians, capitalist bureaucrats (whether in private- or public-sector) believe that humans can be perfected by modifying their behavior according to some ideal, and blame anyone who can't live up to that ideal for failing to do so. If you can't hack the paperwork to file your taxes, complete your welfare rules, figure out your 401(k) or register to vote, you're obviously some kind of fuckup.

Bureaucracy begets bureaucracy. Every effort to do away with bureaucracy ends up with more bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy lies. The point of coming up with rules is to ensure that they're evenly applied. But everyone knows that rules aren't evenly applied. When we replace informal, arbitrary systems with formal sets of rules, the arbitrariness moves up a level — moves up to "who has to follow the rules and who doesn't." Sell a joint, go to jail. Launder billions for the Sinaloa cartel, [defer some of your bonus for a few weeks](#).

"Everybody knows" would be a good alternative title for this book. Like the [Leonard Cohen song](#), reading this book (especially the introduction, which is the sort of thing that someone should turn into a 20-minute info-video) makes you recognize that there's a huge, awful, lying center to the world as we inhabit it. As Graeber says, bureaucracies are supposed to be meritocracies where people are hired and promoted based on talent, not because of birth or personal connections. But we all know that's bullshit — and we also all know that the only way to rise in the Bureaucratic Utopia is to pretend that it isn't bullshit.

Graeber wants us to demand the impossible. To stop making capitalism. To wake up in the morning and just walk away from the lie. To refuse the intimidation of latent violence. To reclaim the critique of rules and privilege that was the Left's to take to the streets in 1968.

In these three essays, a brilliant introduction, and a fabulous afterword (about the relationship of Christopher Nolan's Batman movies to Occupy and capitalism), Graber manages to tease out something wordless and important, about how we might imagine a world where we don't need violence to keep us in check and stop letting the people who say we do run the show.

[The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy](#)

-Cory Doctorow