

The Demon Of Writing: Powers and Failures of Paperwork

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Historians can only feel ambivalent about bureaucracy. ‘Admin’ tends to get in the way of those two core activities that define a university, research and teaching. Some of it might be necessary and benign: seminars require registers, after all. But we huff and puff about some of its other manifestations: TRAC returns; PDR forms; annual programme reviews; research plans; and QAA-correct paper trails relating to module innovation and student feedback. Meanwhile, every five or six years – or so it seems – senior management teams initiate university-wide ‘restructuring programmes’ in yet another quest for administrative efficiency, which never quite arrives. Bureaucracy is not something that normally thrills historians; far from it in fact. And yet, without it, without bureaucracy, us historians would have a good deal fewer sources to go on, the very things we *do* get excited about: committee minutes; official inquiries; inspectors’ reports; registration documents; birth and death certificates; audits and accounts; serial-numbered letters, memos, files, forms, dossiers ... All archives are monuments to officialdom, more or less.

This is especially so for historians of modern Europe, for as Ben Kafka argues in *The Demon of Writing*, though the French Revolution may have given birth to celebrations of national sovereignty and Declarations of the Rights of Man, it also spawned a monster that in subsequent centuries would be presented as the insidious, all-pervasive foe of freedom-loving peoples everywhere: *la bureaucratie*; or what Karl Marx once dubbed the ‘bureaucratic medium’. Liberty, Equality, Fraternity ... Bureaucracy! One can hardly imagine Parisian radicals slaying aristocrats and storming castles in the name of ‘paperwork’, Kafka’s generic term for the day-to-day currency of desk-bound functionaries. But as Kafka describes in his opening chapter, where he recounts the sorry fate of an aggrieved *ancien régime* bureaucrat, Edme-Étienne Morizot, the

Revolution gave rise to a new culture of paper-chasing, premised on the democratic desire for public accountability and the logistical demands of running a nation. Article 15 of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) was quite explicit about the matter: ‘Society has the right to ask all public agents to give an accounting of their administration’ (pp. 43–4).

This was one of the last articles to be debated by the Constituent Assembly and among the least controversial. With little in the way of drama or debate, ‘paperwork had become a technology of political representation’ (p. 44), inserted into the constitutional fabric of a fledgling sovereign nation. The trouble was it didn’t work especially well. Enter Morizot. Having been shrugged off and given the run-around by his former employers, whom he accused of unfair dismissal, he expected more from the new order of accountability. He was sorely disappointed. His particular case, as collected in an individual dossier, was among the 19,356 submitted to the Reports Committee during the first two years of the Revolution. The Committee was not workshy: during the same two years, it authored almost 14,000 letters (p. 45). The problem, rather, was that it was overworked, lost and confused amidst a proliferation of equally urgent cases. Aggrieved, frustrated, Morizot dashed into print, penning pamphlets and letters regarding his plight, two of which (in 1792 and 1793) appeared in Jean-Paul Marat’s radical journal, *L’Ami du peuple*. And then nothing: we still don’t know quite what happened to poor old Edme-Étienne Morizot, a bureaucrat defeated by bureaucracy.

Jacques-Louis David’s well-known painting (1793) of Marat, slain in the bath yet clutching a piece of paper, captures the (often comic) tragedy that Kafka seeks to explore in this short yet suitably joyful and character-driven book regarding the ‘powers and failures’ of bureaucracy. On the one hand, Rousseau’s dream of the ongoing, democratic self-presence of citizens, pure in their unified will and deliberations; on the other, the rude eruption of the political-logistical necessity of paperwork, in all its vulgar, maddening materiality.⁽¹⁾ Following Jacques Derrida’s philosophical lead and giving it a political twist, Kafka is interested in the writing that thwarts but also makes possible practices of collective self-determination. Necessary, yet disabling; facilitating, yet frustrating: for Kafka bureaucracy is the ‘trace’ that inhabits/inhibits the modern liberal democratic project. ‘What is true of philosophy in general, I reasoned’, states Kafka in his introduction, ‘must be true of political philosophy or political theory in particular, which has always preferred the voice of power over its written traces, the great discourses of kings and legislators over the obscure scrivenings of functionaries and clerks’ (p. 11).

Bureaucracy *per se* was nothing new at the end of the 18th century. Kafka notes a survey undertaken in 1770 that suggested there were some 5,700 document depositories in France, largely in the hands of feudal, monastic and local authorities (p. 33). Furthermore, the irony that the Revolution only reworked rather than diminished the bureaucratic largesse of the Old Regime has been noted before. Alexis de Tocqueville recognised as much in his *L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution*, published in 1856; and Tocqueville’s stock has been growing ever since François Furet resurrected his thesis regarding the fate of the Revolution in the late 1970s.⁽²⁾ Kafka’s approach is different, and it is by no means a straightforward work of history, if indeed that is what it is. For his interest lies not just in the fact of bureaucracy, but also in how it functioned, just as it still does today, as a protean source of fantasy and perverse enjoyment. The book is, as Kafka sets out in his introduction, partly an exercise in ‘psychohistory’, in this case of ‘the psychic life of paperwork’ (p. 16). Bureaucracy is as much myth as material reality, argues Kafka; and the two – the materiality of bureaucracy and its conceptual-fantastical fashioning – should be grasped together, one stirring the other. More than this, bureaucratic myths, like all myths perhaps, as Kafka suggests, are about managing structural contradictions in how we are governed and govern ourselves (p. 11). ‘The term became a vague expression of an even vaguer sense that something or someone, or many someones – anyone or anything but the structural contradictions of the liberal-democratic project as such – had to be to blame for how much paperwork was required not only to govern, but to be governed in the modern world’ (pp. 81–2).

Curiously, Tocqueville wasn’t fond of the word ‘bureaucracy’, for reasons explored by Kafka (97–106). Yet others used the term, and it is significant, as Kafka points out, that it first was coined, half-jokingly, in 1764, before coming into general use in the mid 19th century. ‘There is no trace of the idea in Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, Rousseau, Burke or even Hegel. Yet by the 1850s it was all the rage’ (p. 11). Kafka’s

principal focus is France, but Britain was home to a similarly pathos-laden linguistic take off, as he notes in passing (p. 75). In 1838, one writer suggested ‘Bureaucracy’ was ‘a term recently borrowed [from France] by English writers’, offering ‘official despotism’ as the closest translation.⁽³⁾ In the 1840s it was used to demonize the Francophile public servant Edwin Chadwick, one of the key architects of much-debated poor law and public health reforms. ‘Was there ever a better bureaucrat than Mr Chadwick?’ declared an editorial in *The Morning Chronicle* in 1847, this man who wants ‘to regulate the world from his writing-desk’.⁽⁴⁾ In the 1850s ratepayers raged against ‘functionarism’ and ‘red-tapism’, whilst Charles Dickens presented readers with the Circumlocution Office in his *Little Dorrit* (1855–7), perhaps the most enduring image of labyrinthine bureaucratic evasion to emerge from the Victorian period.

Kafka has assembled an excellent cast through which to retell the story of bureaucracy as reality and fantasy. From Morizot in chapter one, we pass to Charles-Hippolyte Labussière in chapter two, the celebrated clerk of the Committee of Public Safety’s Prisoner Bureau (1793–5). He was originally thought to have saved the lives of more than 200 prisoners by soaking and shredding their files, rolling them into pocket-sized balls and then throwing them into the Seine from the window of a public baths establishment. By 1927 he was being depicted in Abel Gance’s film, *Napoléon*, eating the dossiers, including that of one Joséphine de Beauharnais. It seems he didn’t exist, however. He was a myth that demystified: ‘Labussière revealed the vulnerability at the basis of the national-security state. Not only was power resistible, it was water soluble’; and for the auteur Gance, at least, edible as well (p. 73).

In the last two chapters of four we encounter a series of more familiar figures, including Marx, Tocqueville, Balzac and Freud, as well as Roland Barthes, who, it turns out, proved an unusually able administrator during a two-and-a-half year stint at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in the 1960s. It is in these two chapters where Kafka gathers together the threads of the preceding two and fleshes out in more detail the contradictions that structured the birth of bureaucracy and our own obsessive tendencies. Besides the tension between the desire for public accountability and minimal, unmediated government, bureaucracy empowered unelected clerks, who in any case lacked social status (pp. 80–1). At a time when administrative reason and clarity were judged necessary if the French nation was to survive, bureaucracy seemed only to generate the opposite: obfuscation, anonymity and irrational pedantry. Another, which Kafka explores with the help of Marx, is the disjuncture between centralized, bureaucratic paperwork on the one hand, and the life of local communities on the other. One is rule-bound, statistical and general; the other is complex, particular and exceptional. Marx thus posited a split between an ‘actual reality’ and ‘a bureaucratic reality, which retains authority however much times may change’ (p. 116).

The book does not aim to be comprehensive, and some readers may find Kafka’s range of material somewhat idiosyncratic; but this is by design, in what is an exploratory, essayistic work. From Barthes we pass in the conclusion to a meditation on the ‘techno-utopianism’ of an IBM advert made in 1967 promising to liberate employees from (yet another) ‘paperwork explosion’: ‘machines should work, people should think’, went the tagline. Bureaucracy, Kafka reminds us, also gave rise to the dream of a world without it: a world where thinking and creating can take place without the drag of administering stuff. Still today we strive for a paperless existence.

Equally, some readers might be left reeling and dizzied by the way Kafka probes and prods texts and images. In the opening chapter Kafka borrows Marx’s famous metaphors to speak of a ‘contradiction’ between the (social) ‘relations’ and (technological) ‘forces’ of bureaucracy with respect to a 1749 French manuscript on police reform (p. 22). Elsewhere, he relies on a Lacanian subject defined by a constitutive lack, which bureaucracy invariably fails to satisfy, as we grope for redress or exchange jokes about its arcane workings (chapter three). In other places Kafka relies on more straightforward relations of text and context, in the vein of intellectual historiography. If anything, the book relies on a kind of Žižekian theoretical matrix, with approving nods here and there to Lacan, Marx and Freud – and Žižek is invoked at one point (p. 79) – coupled with a commitment to the philosophical truth of schisms and snags, and the reality of the Freudian ‘preconscious’ (p. 16).

Ultimately, what is bureaucracy? For Kafka, it is immensely powerful and immensely fragile. Real and

imaginary. We laugh at it; we hate it. Like Barthes we might take pleasure in bureaucratic routine; but it is also a monumental, time-consuming pain in the arse. Our investment in it is financial (as taxpayers) as much as fantastical; psychological as much as physical; critical as much as comic. And this seems to be Kafka's point. 'Bureaucracy' is one of those empty, overdetermined signifiers whose mythological-ideological vitality lies in just this: it means everything and nothing. We could perhaps say the same about its much-vaunted opposite, that other overdetermined, fetishized signifier, 'freedom'. Put another way, to ask what bureaucracy is, in any ultimate sense, is to ask the wrong kind of question. To be precise about the matter one has to be playful.

This is a timely book. Only this month former Tory chancellor Nigel Lawson spoke of the 'bureaucratic monstrosity' of the EU, the latest in a line of right-wing lamentations that places most of the blame for our current ills at the door of 'Eurocrats'.⁽⁵⁾ There was no mention of the enormous loss of economic sovereignty we've witnessed in this country thanks to the rise of global corporations; no mention of the devastating structural flaws of neo-liberal capitalism; in fact Lawson wants more of the same. Meanwhile, support for UKIP is at an all-time high.⁽⁶⁾ Bureaucracy continues to perform sterling ideological work and Kafka's book is the best yet for thinking about just this, past and present.

Still, there remains that nagging thought: for all its failings, bureaucracy does make for abundant archives. Remarkably, Tocqueville wrote of this in his *Democracy in America* (1835/40), where, as Kafka notes, he fretted about what future historians would make of life there, in the absence of any French-style culture of administrative writing. 'There is a sense in which public administration is oral and traditional', wrote Tocqueville. 'Nothing is written, or if it is, the slightest gust of wind carries it off, like Sibylline leaves, to vanish without recall' (p. 99).

'Vive la bureaucratie!' we might say, but not without a strong sense of Kafkaesque irony.

Notes

1. Rousseau's dream was punctured in other ways, of course. Democracy, it turned out, meant *representative* democracy and there was more one kind of 'citizen'. For a fuller discussion of these and other problems see Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Transparency and Obstruction* [trans. Arthur Goldhammer] (Chicago, IL, 1988); and Pierre Rosanvallon, *The Demands of Liberty: Civil Society in France since the Revolution* [trans. Arthur Goldhammer] (Cambridge, MA, 2007), part one.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution* [trans. Elborg Forster] (Cambridge, 1981); and see, most recently, Lucien Jaume, *Tocqueville: The Aristocratic Sources of Liberty* [trans. Arthur Goldhammer] (Princeton, NJ, 2013).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Saxe Bannister, *British Colonization and Coloured Tribes* (London, 1838), p. 161.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Quoted in *A Citizen, Part Two: Centralization or Local Representation: Health of Towns' Bill: The Opinion of the Public Journals* (London, 1848), p. 10.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *The Times*, 7 May 2013 <<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/columnists/article3757562.ece> [2]> [accessed 13.5.2013].[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *The Guardian*, 13 May 2013 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2013/may/13/farage-factor-ukip-support-record> [3]> [accessed 13.5.2013].[Back to \(6\)](#)

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