



## BOOK SYMPOSIUM

# On signatures and traces

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Comment on HULL, Matthew. 2012. *Government of paper: The materiality of bureaucracy in urban Pakistan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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*Translated from the French by Geneviève Godbout*

Here is a remarkable work that should be known, and above all read, not only by the (growing) community of researchers working on writing practices but especially also by anthropology students. In *Government of paper*, Matthew Hull has produced a text of great scientific and literary quality. He demonstrates how the ethnography of bureaucratic writing practices opens up new avenues of scholarship: the investigation he has carried out in the CDA (Capital Development Authority) offices in Islamabad at the end of the 1990s sheds light on the precise manner in which the development of a city is accomplished. The work also provides information about the postcolonial fate of a bureaucratic system put into place by the English and taken up by the Pakistanis following independence. Finally, thanks to the numerous and varied data recovered over the course of many years of fieldwork, Hull offers a fine-grained analysis of some essential documents (such as maps, files, and petitions) without losing sight of all the interactions that are organized around these artifacts and without neglecting to follow certain cases that help us to better understand how the document factory that is the CDA does and does not work. The book demonstrates that a thorough study of those universes that are a priori reserved to specialists (in this case, the bureaucratic machinery that manages the capital city of Pakistan) creates on the contrary a demand for other works in the same vein.

From a methodological point of view, it seems to me that Hull's main contribution is his choice to focus on the circulation of documents. This choice is also

theoretically motivated because it is inscribed in a pragmatics of the written text that foregrounds use and practice, rather than in purely linguistic or semiotic approaches (approaches that the author nevertheless does not neglect). Studying the circulation of documents brings several strategies into play: one must observe the way in which written texts really pass from hand to hand within the CDA. Hull masterfully analyzes office scenes, showing how a document circulates in situations typical to life at the CDA. How does one present a petition? How can one consult a plan and obtain a copy of it? How does one speed up a file or slow it down, or even make it disappear? Many such actions are at the heart of Islamabad's bureaucratic machine and are relevant to all managerial organization that is based on documents.

Hull follows these routes without neglecting the real situation in which they unfold. We find here a type of ethnographic survey that has been practiced in France for several decades already, following the "Language et Travail" network (Language and Labor network, Borzeix and Fraenkel 2001) with which the author does not appear to be familiar. The goal is to capture workplace situations in all their complexity and to show how texts are "located," in contrast to those theories that lend a form of autonomy to graphic artifacts, which they consider to be decontextualized by nature. Hull's work dovetails with this research trend. He articulates the descriptions of the use of texts with the analysis of verbal interactions, with accounts of the layout of sites where this use occurs. The work of historian Delphine Gardey on furniture, writing instruments, and spatial layout of the workplace in administrative offices (Gardey 2001) could also enrich Hull's analyses, as well as many other publications.

Observing the circulation of documents also brings the author to discover the way in which the administered procure these documents, use them, act upon them. One of the most remarkable results of the research is to show how the users—far from submitting to the authority and complexity of the administration—succeed in turning bureaucratic logic in their favor. Hull then highlights the inadequacy of theories that only consider the coercive power of state apparatuses for want of a subtle exploration of their inner-workings. Hull claims, on the contrary, that a bureaucratic system can generate its own failures. Here is a powerful argument conducive to moderating the simplism of post-Foucaultian theories that turn the panopticon into an all-encompassing interpretive project. The critical power of great ethnographic fieldwork—of which Hull's is unquestionably part—is here reaffirmed. The imperative for an ethnography of the State grounded in real writing practices is to be inscribed on the horizon for future social sciences and humanities research.

In the spirit of initiating a dialog with Matthew S. Hull, I would like to raise two points. The first is in regard to the status of signatures in the written documents of the CDA; the second is in regard to the traceability of the texts produced by the CDA. Those two points, the first one in particular, tally with questions that I am familiar with (Fraenkel 1992).

The word "signature" appears in the index of the book (Hull 2012: 299), and it appears predominantly in chapter three, "files and the political economy of paper." This chapter begins with a signature scene: at the end of the day, Zaffar Khan, the powerful director of the CDA, sits down to sign the files brought to him by his assistant. He signs without reading after listening to the summary offered by the

assistant, without hiding the disdain that such an activity inspires in him. During a survey carried out in France among bailiffs (Fraenkel et al. 2010), I have observed many scenes of this kind. In the evening, after a busy day, the bailiff settles down in his deserted study and spends two to three hours signing the documents prepared by his clerks. The difference between the two scenes is obvious: far from expressing an aristocratic contempt for the task, some bailiffs skim the proceedings even if they do not always read them attentively, while others examine them scrupulously. These two attitudes seem to match two types of management: one based on trust in the employees, the bailiff does not check with care; the other is based on control.

Zaffar Khan's attitude stems from a rather different position. Hull tells us about a revealing episode a little further down (2012: 154). Different files circulate within the CDA, as do construction permit applications and complaints regarding compensations in the event of an eviction. When a decision is made, a chain of agents from different levels of the hierarchy sign the file, but it invariably ends its journey on the desk of high-ranking officers. The latter are almost obligated to sign the file or lose the solidarity of their employees. Zaffar Khan himself signs a suspicious file before Hull, one that implicates one of the CDA agents, although he is perfectly aware of the accusations leveled against the dishonest employee. He explains this behavior by his "paternalistic desire to protect one of his own" and above all by his solidarity with the officers who have signed before him.

Such scenes raise the question of the control exerted by CDA agents over bureaucratic work. Hull doesn't really address the topic although he acknowledges that the organization functions rather well. My first question is this: What type of control does one observe at the CDA? To this I add a second, subsidiary question: How do agents, as public officials of the state, look upon their signature? Does the fact that they are invested, to various degrees, with a fragment of public authority give to their signature a particular value that may be described as a performative power?

Hull rightly insists on the importance of the collective within which all individual responsibilities appear to dissolve. As can be observed in many administrative services of the state, and more broadly in a large number of organizations, it is in fact a collective that works, made up of agents that collaborate and coordinate among themselves. But does this collective agency really occasion the disappearance of individual actions? What can we make of the "docketing" procedures described by Hull? It is a matter of the different ways in which the different pieces of a file are recorded. Each document is described and it is specified which ones were signed and by whom. Hull notes that while in the past the name of the signatories were recorded, now only their rank is indicated such that one cannot identify who has signed. But then how does that affect investigations? How can one reconstitute the journey of a document? Must one conclude that no investigation can ever succeed? Besides, is the constitution of a collective agency possible without the recognition of a certain distribution of skills, whether it is based on official tests (such as diplomas or other training) or on reputations established by shared work experience? On this matter, Hull gives the example of officers known for their honesty or their know-how. Are these "local" manners of identifying one another ineffective or irrelevant during investigations?

These questions bring us to reflect on the traceability of bureaucratic work. Is it not necessary to distinguish between two types of marks: those that pertain to the

validation of documents, the signatures and stamps in the first instance, and those that pertain to their traceability and can also take the form of signatures? We know that the history of signature takes shape in royal chanceries. Signatures have long been subaltern signs that were mostly used by scribes while the great—kings, princes and emperors—used seals that held the dominant performative power. The seal, the subscription, the *signum*, then later (beginning in the fourteenth century), the signature are signs of validation. Under certain conditions, these signs have the power to transform texts into authentic documents vested with testimonial and executive power.

The so-called “signature ideology” loses sight of the bureaucratic substrate by focusing on the autography that defines the signature and presupposes the presence of a signatory. This presence is not sufficient to invest the sign with performative power.

This is why the question of the dissolution of individual responsibility within the collective is complex. The mark left by every agent on a document signals their participation in collective production but does it necessarily bind their legal responsibility? Is the latter not taken by the head of a service or an organization, a character whose signature has precisely a different value than that of the agents under their orders? What about the functioning of signs of validations in the making of legal acts in Pakistan, which often shape a great number of writing practices beyond their own domain?

I hope these few questions show the great interest I found in reading Hull’s masterful work. They represent but a few of the reflections that *Government of paper* calls forth.

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