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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Paper as a serious *method* of concern

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

What is paper? How does paper become a document in the realm of bureaucracy? And what can be ethnographically said about it? These questions are not trivial. The contrary is true. Our lives are entangled in documents, files, folders, in their movement and circulation. Yet these divergent instantiations of "paper" are entangled in practices, power relations, ideologies, and histories. Matthew S. Hull's book, *Government of paper*, unpacks all these aspects of the social life of paper and bureaucracy, its materiality, and the epistemological and ontological problems that bureaucratic paperwork entails.

The study of bureaucracy in social science scholarship has been well-established since the dawn of modern state formations (e.g., Marx, Merton, Weber). It was, however, only the postcolonial era that stimulated ethnographic research into the continuities and transformation of colonial practices, such as the work of bureaucracy in postcolonial states. For many years, the dominant frameworks in anthropological studies of (postcolonial) bureaucracy have been political economy, and even more importantly the Foucauldian nexus of power/knowledge and its discursive and performative instances. However, as David Graeber aptly argued (2012), the heartlands of bureaucracy and the structural violence it produces are more subtle and lie elsewhere—in the very paperwork. Paperwork as a matter of ethnographic concern, Graeber argues, is something rather boring, seemingly shallow, and hence on the margins of research attention, if compared with other aspects of lives inside and outside of bureaucratic walls, full of dense meaning. *Government*

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of paper can be read in a similar vein as the direction pointed to by Graeber. Bureaucracy and paperwork are inherent to modern knowledge practices, including academic scholarship such as anthropology. Thus, Hull reminds the reader, anthropologists studying bureaucracy have also often tended to look at things *through* paperwork rather than looking *at* it (2012: 12).

Hull's book is a good attempt to move anthropological scholarship on from the political economy of the postcolonial state and bureaucracy *tout court* toward its very materiality and apparent margins, that of paperwork. Specifically, how the entanglements of practices and organization of paper and people, institutions and spaces, power and resistance are *mediated* and enacted through "paper." Indeed, here *paper* can be understood as a metaphor for a larger set of analytical concerns on the "actually existing bureaucracy," but the notion of paper ought to be also "taken seriously" (*sensu* Latour 2005), or literally if you will.

Hull's ethnography is succinct and theoretically ambitious. By taking paper seriously, it departs from the recent "materiality turn," blended with science and technology studies (STS), the study of language, and "semiotic ideologies" (Keane 2003) to advance what he describes as *graphic ideology* (Hull 2012: 14) and *graphic artifacts* (27) and their organization. Graphic ideology incorporates those aspects of graphic artifacts that are to count as signs in a specific context and help us to trace what is often described as a bureaucratic discourse through its own material enactments and forms of mediation. We might liken these to the linguistic concept of phonemics—those sounds in a given language that provide meaningful contrasts. Hull defines graphic artifacts as a kind of semiotic technology that mediates "almost all bureaucratic activities" (21). This is an inclusive analytical category, which extends a particular ethnographic context and provides a framework for making sense of ritual, ancient writing forms, contemporary writing, and electronic forms of communication. Part of Hull's aim in adopting the conceptual categories of graphic ideology and graphic artifact is to synthesize insights from anthropology and STS. This analytical move will enable, Hull argues, a valuable mechanism for dealing with both what the material qualities of artifacts *mean* as well as what they *do*. The context of the study, the bureaucratic assemblage in Islamabad, Pakistan, with the legacy of British colonial bureaucracy, and pervasive use of Urdu as well as English as its languages of conduct makes urban Pakistan a suitable case for such an analysis. Hull's attempt to outline a way of studying "materiality of signification" or "semiotic technologies" is intriguing and worth engaging with as it bridges many ruptures between STS and anthropology.

In this review we break away from the book's theoretical debates, however, and engage with an inchoate angle of the book, that of methodological implication of studying graphic artifacts and ideologies for doing ethnography. Put differently, *Government of paper* implicitly offers a methods manual for ethnographically studying the subtle domain of the materiality of bureaucracy. We take the question of *method* seriously (e.g., Fischer et al. 2013), inasmuch as it has become fashionable in recent years to take materiality seriously, so we want to highlight both the strengths and weaknesses of such an emphasis on *thinginess* and organization-cum-assemblage oriented ethnographic research. Regrettably, in our view, it has often become mantra to cite a range of theories in the place of systematically discussing, and *justifying*, the methodological foundations of the data production and analysis that can lead to generating a solid ethnographic theory. Method becomes an unim-

portant appendix at best. If we read the book through this lens, as a model for how to generate and analyze data on the materiality of bureaucracy, then we find that there is much to be commended but also some disconcerting lacunae that suggest that at least part of Hull's conclusions must be treated as tentative at best.

We do not suggest that this renders Hull's book somehow unworthy—far from it. Indeed, there is much we appreciate both about Hull's approach as well as the ethnographic observations he provides for subsequent studies. We would, however, like to take a moment to critically engage with an important thrust of the book, which seems to neglect the importance of what have long been considered more central aspects of the ethnography of Pakistan.

Hull makes much of the role of paper as the foundation of bureaucracy in Pakistan and beyond. While paper clearly has a significant symbolic power and the medium imposes particular ways of operating, this is perhaps an aspect of Hull's approach that makes apparent the need to go beyond the paper and beyond the assemblage of the bureaucratic office. This opens both theoretical and methodological questions about where/when to cut the network (Strathern 1996). Even if the primary unit of analysis in this case is the bureaucracy or the paper that according to Hull produces it, then by Hull's own account there are external social relationships of kinship, friendship, and patronage that permeate the bureaucracy and indeed the paper, which cannot be neglected. Hull is obviously aware of these external networks but is unable to deal with them satisfactorily because of his narrow focus on the graphic artifacts.

Let us illustrate this argument with a contrasting approach, namely with Lyon's interest in land registration and inheritance in rural Punjab, Pakistan. Most recently, Lyon (2013) analyzed changes in inheritance, marital, and religious practices in a rural village in the Punjab over the past two hundred years. Part of the information was produced from the local *patwari* (land registry official) who had responsibility for recording land ownership and transfers. The paper and cloth records were treated with something that combined both reverence and apprehension. For the *patwari*, the documents were fundamental and if an anthropologist were to concentrate primarily on his office (in this case, as in most cases, the *patwari* was a man), then it would indeed appear that paper was far more than simply a convenient medium for recording information. The paper constructs the reality. For the landlords, however, one would come to a different conclusion. The paper, rather than making the bureaucracy, is the product of the kinship and patronage networks that are arguably a more comprehensive and satisfactory explanatory mechanism for understanding both the creation and the continuity of Pakistan's bureaucracy. Lyon used social networks analysis not as metaphor, à la Latour, but rather as a method for analyzing the ethnographic case or observation (Schweizer 1997). With this approach he reanalyzed genealogical and marital data from a rural village in Punjab for a time period covering from about 1800 until 2010. There were marked periods during this time in which inheritance and marital practices shifted. These were partially in response to changes in bureaucracy, but equally these were in response to shifting religious and political relationships at national and international levels. Lyon, we suggest, neglected the role of the materiality of the land records because this did not seem to be of paramount importance to the landlords with whom he was working. Hull, similarly, neglected the role of kinship and patronage networks because they did not seem to be of paramount importance

from the paper. As always, anthropological arguments are founded on the data produced in the field. Hull's book reminds us that it is incumbent upon the anthropologist to ensure that the Holy Grail of holism is not set aside in the interests of satisfying the interests of ever narrowing subdisciplinary silos. Lyon *should* and *could* have devoted more time and attention to land registry paper. Hull, equally, *should* and *could* have devoted more time and attention to the social networks of people "beyond office," which provide both material and symbolic continuity more generally in Pakistan.

In his *Government of paper*, Hull has produced an admirable book on a topic that has far reaching implications. As a theoretical contribution, Hull has successfully provided a thoroughly respectable example of how one might go about making sense of bureaucratic assemblages in general and in postcolonial contexts more specifically. Although Hull does not dwell on the methodological implications, we believe that the book should be read as much for these as for the theoretical contribution or as an ethnographic instance. That the reader must decipher such methods should not diminish the importance or the impact of the book.

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