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BOOK SYMPOSIUM

The question of the political
Thinking with Matthew Hull

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

In my review of Matthew Hull's elegantly composed and rigorously argued ethnography *Government of paper: The materiality of bureaucracy in urban Pakistan* (2012), I have bravely opted to explore the question of the political. I say "bravely" because I am not always sure what the question entails as the word "political" has moved from being a descriptor as in "political speech" or "political violence" to being a domain of its own as in *the political*. I pursue the question in Hull's work as a way to think with him about what scholars might mean when they ask after the status of the political in a work and what I would like to mean by it. As this is not the place to attempt a genealogy of the concept and as I am more interested to elicit a working understanding of it, I begin by drawing out what I see as the considerable scholarly contributions of *Government of paper* before turning to its picture of politics and my critical engagement with this picture.

There is now a veritable industry of scholarly works exploring the effects of new media technologies on the production of selves and subjectivities. For instance, Brian Rotman's *Being beside ourselves: The alphabet, ghosts, and distributed human being* (2008), a particularly interesting work within this genre, suggests that virtual technologies and networked media are silently and insistently reconfiguring the human subject into an assemblage of selves producing what he calls the "distributed human being." Matthew Hull's work, specifically his conclusion that dwells on e-governance, intimates a critique of such works by suggesting that they may be vulnerable to new media's own hype about its newness and radical capacities. Instead, *Government of paper* makes the seemingly anachronistic yet provocative claim that all new media, when taken back to the context of their origins and usage

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reveal their materiality and that this may comprise paper artifacts. It is not that the radicalness of new media is thus cut down to size but the relentless energies of media to "mediate," or what I take to mean as transfigure, is read back such that paper as documents may be seen to set the horizons for our present. Consequently, I would argue that one can see a version of the distributed human being in the Rotman sense emerge in Hull's chapter on bureaucratic files (chapter three) in which he traces the creation of collective authorship through the dispersion of responsibility across multiple documents and signatories. As Hull observes, historically paper was given "the qualities of discourse, people, places, and time through the use of signatures, dates, stamps, and interartifactual references" (2012: 257).

The resonance I sense between Hull and Rotman may end there because, unlike Rotman, Hull would not fully subscribe to the dogma that writing, when it first came into being, enabled disembodied forms—such as that of the self or the state—to emerge. In Latourian fashion, Hull would likely argue against the historical existence of such pure forms. And if his ethnography shows anything, it shows the persistence of written documents, or what he calls graphic artifacts, in transecting forms by constantly creating and mediating social relations. While the literature on new media tends to give short shrift to the social, in *Government of paper* it is given center stage. Documents move among domains, say those of government, families, moral codes, companies, the past, and the present, by procedural lines of transmission, short circuits, or even zones of incommensuration (see chapter four). The effect is not only a multiplication of what counts as graphic artifacts but also of the domains themselves and of their associations, making the thickness of bureaucracy serve as a revelation on the nature of the social in this setting. In *Reassembling the social* (2005), Bruno Latour complains that the social is too often taken as an explanation in itself, whereas, he claims, it is the social that is in need of description. In the Latourian mode of approach to it, the social ought to surprise rather than explain, and Hull's description of the social does precisely this. One is surprised to learn both of the degree of internal coherence within artifacts and the manner in which they invite and are worked over by people's participation.

From these few lines of discussion of Hull's work I hope it begins to be clear what constitutes its political stakes (not yet the political but the project it has given itself). It is its insistence upon always keeping in view the effects that documents produce in terms of materiality and mediation. Once new/old artifacts, domains, and associations—that is, the agential dimensions of the nonhuman—have been rendered visible, it takes continuous work to keep them that way. And it implies constant striving against the felt imperative to provide explanations for why things have come to work this way, for such explanatory overdrive risks undermining the expansion of the scope of politics or, shall we finally say, the political. Here then is the moment to crudely rehearse what may be entailed when scholars inquire after the status of the political in a work. Let me be clear that what follows isn't necessarily what I see as the import of the political but what I perceive (rightly or wrongly) as what scholars seek in the political in any given work.

Drawing on Eugene Miller's helpful review of what the political means (1980), we may take it in its modern manifestation to refer to the affairs of the nation-state. Here too there has been an observable shift in interest from an earlier focus on institutional forms of government to wider questions about the juridico-legal and the nature of sovereignty with the more recent focus on the relation between

politics and ethics. I bracket these shifts with apologies as I seek only to point out that these shifts remain within the rubric of the state. Consequently, I would venture that for a work to count as political there must be a substantial description of the nature and workings of the state even within the sinews of the social. With this understanding of the political in mind we may take Hull's work to be political or more precisely to be about the political in so far as it traces how a bureaucracy insinuates the state into everyday life. Already Hull qualifies this with his observation that "state practices are extended but not state power" (2012: 186) within the context of land appropriation in Islamabad.

There is another ring of meaning around the word "political" that Miller draws out that has to do with the affairs of the *polis* or the city-state. While this is the archaic Greek meaning of the political and has been put aside by its contemporary association with the nation-state, it is surely not coincidental that Hull's ethnography is above all about a city. Although Hull does not explicitly pose the question of the political community produced in Islamabad (and I wondered why he did not), he refers to it tangentially by asking how "people engage the bureaucracy and enact different political subjects" (33). Consequently, I would argue that his line of inquiry implicitly draws on this older meaning of the concept of the political in which it is the common aspirations and activity of the polis or the city.

With the city in mind, a different picture of Hull's contribution to the political becomes apparent than one in which he may be seen to show how a bureaucracy brings the state within the lives of its citizens. While Hull readily acknowledges that there are no instances of the more obvious markers of civil society in Islamabad, such as municipal government, neighborhood associations, voluntary organizations, or mutual aid societies, he nonetheless makes an argument for a political composed of what he calls "participatory bureaucracy." The everyday interventions into the workings of bureaucracy, the sidestepping of office hierarchies, the collective authorship of documents and files, and the occasions in which ordinary people in possession of official files effectively serve as extensions of the office into the world are not tactics developed by the citizens of Islamabad to compensate for a lack of civil society institutions. Rather this is the politics and vigorous participation in it that the city and its bureaucracy have enabled. Even as colonial and postcolonial authorities envisaged bureaucracies and building practices as crucial means by which to keep government isolated from society, the workings of the bureaucracy in Islamabad suggest not how the state has entered everyday life but rather how this life with its ordinary concerns, moral codes, ethical dilemmas, collective action, and so forth have come to suffuse the state bureaucracy.

Thus, it is possible to summarize Hull's contributions to the question of the political: he draws our attention to the agencies of entities in addition to human subjects; he enlarges the scope of the political by considering graphic artifacts as productive of new sites and means by which to participate in the workings of government; and, finally, he privileges the city as distinct from the state in evolving this politics. I confess I prefer this mode of engagement with the political than one with a singular focus on the state, despite salutary work that serves to remind us of the coercive and ever-expanding powers of the modern state. This preferred mode allows for a far greater diversity of formations and interplay of scales such that we might imagine how to proliferate, rather than circumscribe, movements and transfigurations through our works.

Yet there is something that baffles even in the promising picture of the political offered up by *Government of paper*. To elaborate let me return briefly to Miller's essay on what the political means. In it he reminds us that just as an archaic meaning encircles the dominant understanding of the political as affairs of the nation-state, so too does another, more semantic meaning in which the political indicates that which is equivocal, ambiguous, or difficult to interpret. I was forcefully reminded of this understanding and experience of the political in reading Cabeiri Robinson's introduction to *Body of victim, body of warrior: Refugee families and the making of Kashmiri Jihadists* (2013). Her careful qualification of the subjects of her study and of her own position with respect to them suggests not only the turbulent nature of politics in this part of the world over, in which Pakistan and India have been deadlocked for decades, but of the degree of uncertainty, the field of adversarial positions, and the multiplicity of claims-making that render this situation the very definition of the political. Even in a book such as Hussein Agrama's *Questioning secularism: Islam, sovereignty and the rule of law in Egypt* (2012), one that is committed to excavating the powers of the modern state, there is an acknowledgement of the equivocation central to the political such that any action in our present is almost certain to arouse debate over what motivates it and whether it is political or religious or something else.

If, as Hussein Agrama asserts, equivocation is central to our present understanding of the political, where is the play of such indeterminacy in the analyses within Hull's *Government of paper*? While Hull sets up an appearance of equivocation at times, such as when he suggests that the actions and activities he describes may be, indeed have been, taken to be corruption, he very strongly puts aside this interpretation in favor of his own about a mode of participation that attempts to integrate documentary norms and practices with everyday moral codes and ways of being. For instance, if a woman accepts without any serious misgiving a falsehood in representation in a building plan, Hull argues it is most likely because she believes that the land and what she does with it is within her moral rights as her father's legatee and not a consequence of a culture of expropriation born of a sense of entitlement (see Hull 2012: 59–60). But why can it not be both?

Other opportunities to explore the scope of equivocation within the political appear to flit by without commentary expect as the workings of graphic artifacts. Here I am referring to scenes of disappointment, even despair, in which the representation of suffering is no more than the different subject positions bureaucracy can induce—that is, citizen, bureaucrat, supplicant. More specifically I refer to the scene in which a man first tears up and then falls to the feet of an official in asking for a promotion long denied to him (see Hull 2012: 87). What if these are missed opportunities to explore the senses of injustice and oppression that infuse even the greatest adept to the city's bureaucracy?

I inquire into the place of equivocation in Hull's ethnography because the political that it delineates has to be tested not only by its degree of internal coherence and scope for expanded participation but also by its capacity to yield different, even conflicting interpretations and to withstand multiple commentaries. Without this quality of indeterminacy or the continuous struggle over the truth, the political loses its robustness and cannot account for people's engagement and return to this domain other than out of their self-interest. In some respects, I am asking the question Michel Foucault explores in his lectures gathered in *The government of self*

and others (2010): what are the capacities for political discourse in a polis, particularly one in which the spiritual director to whom one would give oneself over is indifferent to truth? Indifferent to truth is, after all, how Hull describes the perception of the Pakistani state among its citizens (2012: 60). While I am not asking Hull what is it that his subjects might describe as their ideal world (a banal question that may only elicit formulaic, perhaps indifferent responses), I am asking how do or might people put themselves together with graphic artifacts to enable a livable present *and* excitement for potential modes of existence for future possible subjects and sociality?

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