
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*
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 unus-
important 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, howev-
er, 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 methodolo-
gical 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 relation-
ships 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 re-
cently, 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 apprehen-
sion. 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 pat-
wari 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

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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.

References


