NEW BOOKS

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Remove the Document — and You Remove the Man[1]

Book Review: Hull M. S (2012) *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

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Abstract

In his book "Government of Paper", Matthew Hull questions the way in which bureaucracies are enacted in practice through the analysis of the material products of their lifecycle — documents. Documents constantly engage with different people, places, and things, becoming "bureaucratic objects" that mediate all actors and objects involved. Previously overlooked in theoretical studies, the material side of documents seems to be crucial for shaping the governance of a city and its inhabitants. As writing practices and "graphic artifacts" establish a stable relationship between words and things, discourse, and individuals/objects/environments, a focus on documents can provide a new methodological perspective in the analysis of state bureaucracies.

The book contains six parts: the introduction provides the reader with a theoretical framework on the material practices of bureaucracy establishment. It is followed by five thematic chapters devoted to different types of widely used documents among state bureaucrats of the Islamabad Capital Territory Administration (ICTA) and Capital Development Authority (CDA).

Keywords: bureaucracy; Pakistan; Islamabad; documents; files; materiality; mediators; governance.

"Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan" is a book neither about Pakistan nor urban planning. Of course, they are the very "flesh and bones" of the text, and Hull's conclusions are inseparable from the field materials he has collected. And of course, the text may be of particular interest for the city planners and urban scientists as well as for those interested in British post-colonial legacy or southeastern region studies. But the very heart of the book is about how the bureaucracy is *done* — not the way it is organized of performed, but the way bureaucracy is enacted. To demonstrate this, Hull gives a reader's full attention to one of the core features of bureaucracy — to the production, circulation, and implementation of different types of documents and the way they organize and define social relations around them.

[1] Cit: Bulgakov M. (1967) *The Master and Margarita* (trans. from Russian by M. Glenny), London: Collins and Harvill Press, p. 151. Available at: http://www.masterandmargarita.eu/estore/pdf/eben001_mastermargarita_glenny.pdf (accessed 17 May 2017).

The author claims that documents in his particular story are more than just event traces; they have an essential role in the flow of the bureaucratic process and therefore in the production of the city (p. 30). The overwhelming materiality of graphic objects allows us to treat files, maps, lists, and petitions as mediators between the Islamabad government and its citizens, the area of power relations and physical environment, and the official organizational framework and the way things work in real life. As files are "workhorses" of Pakistan bureaucracy, and all "requests must find their way onto the paper of files to have a life beyond talk" (p. 113), one of the first questions a reader might ask is whether we (or they) can ever go digital.

There is no easy answer for that question, and Hull's aim was never to persuade us that "manuscripts don't burn". However, he explores documents as certain representations of particular *graphic ideologies* and also suggests their place in the *political economy of paper* (they are both its products and foundation). Documents are a great example of images of the state [Sharma, Gupta 2006], a semiotic technology of populace domination and government (p. 205). "Transparency", "accountability," and "efficiency" of the state look just like they are because we are so bounded by materiality.

Importantly, this material aspect of document production and circulation sheds light on complicated relations within Pakistani society, objectivates existing distinctions and hierarchies, and constitutes a particular type of social order. We do not think of material and symbolic connections with state officials and bureaucrats until the moment we enter a public service office with a request. Writing sets things in motion, and documents cannot ignore the sociality and power this motion has.

The "*Government of Paper*" consists of a theory-based *Introduction* and five chapters devoted to different types of widely circulating documents within Pakistan bureaucracy. "*The Master Plan and Other Documents*" sheds some light on the city construction in accordance (or not?) with a *plan* of a Greek architect Constantinos Doxiadis, and the way Islamabad developed. "*Parchis, Petitions, and Offices*" tells a story of different but supplementary mechanisms of supplicants' influence and recognition inside the office hierarchy — *parchis* and *petitions*. "*Files and the Political Economy of Paper*" focuses on *files* as a mixture of individual and collective agency and blurring responsibility. "*The Expropriation of Land and Misappropriation of Lists*" points to the state mediation of land ownership through the *lists* for houses demolition. And "*Maps, Mosques, and Maslaks*" is devoted to the ambiguity of *maps'* status and detachment of planned schemes from a real community life.

The book carefully uncovers all these levels of paper mediation and proposes both intriguing clues for documents as a reality per se and provides a methodological approach to study this reality.

"He could Think in Italics. Such People Need Watching. Preferably from a Safe Distance"[2]

We rarely reflect on the fact that documents constitute our entire lives, and even rarer we doubt why it's happened in the first place, that they constitute our life. For Hull, this is a starting point, and the problem's been already solved—documents are material artefacts that frame our lives in mediation. The next step is to look at this precise process with a lens of city development and ask, "How does materiality shape the governing?" However, textuality is essential for understanding social relations [Smith 1984], and documents are more than just paper itself.

But what are documents actually? In his review of the most influential approaches toward documents per se, Michael K. Buckland relies on Paul Otlet's and Suzanne Briet's ideas. According to Otlet, documents should be treated as objects, parts of a material culture: "Graphic and written records are representations of ideas or of

[2] Cit: Pratchett T. (1993) *Men at Arms (Discworld Novel 15)*, New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

objects, but the *objects themselves* can be regarded as 'documents' if you are informed by observation of them". [Buckland 1997: 805–806]. Briet's position would be that documents are evidence, and the researcher should focus on their semiotics: "A document is any physical or symbolic sign preserved or recorded, intended to represent, to reconstruct, or to demonstrate a physical or conceptual phenomenon" [Buckland 1997: 805–806].

The documentary capacity to crystallize and preserve a definite form of words detached from their local historicity is a key feature for documents and their place in the social relations [Smith 1984: 60]. As the words (or information in general) become detached from their original context and "local historicity", they become a proof in and of themselves. If the document is a proof (or "evidence" in Briet's terms), it becomes authoritative by virtue of being a document (or by being perceived as one), and persistence and visuality become key origins of a document's authority [Gorichanaz 2016: 301–304].

We could link the "persistence" to material culture and treating documents as objects, and "visuality" to their status as "evidence". These are two important contributors to documents' role in social relations, particularly in an organization. Documents objectify knowledge, organization, and decision processes, distinguishing what individuals do for themselves from what they do organizationally or discursively [Smith 1984]. This implies that "a documentary reality is fundamental to the practices of governing, managing and administration of this form of society" [Smith 1974: 257], as governing obtains a capacity to separate the performance of ruling from particular individuals and makes organization independent of particular persons and local settings [Smith 1984]. In sum, documents are vital for an organization's existence, as they proof orders and disposals and assure governing (and imply control), which is a ground rule for the legal authority.

Another good reason for documents' existence is their ability to generate larger-scale forms of sociality serving as vehicles of imagination. Hull relates here to Sharma and Gupta's concept of "images of state" and concludes that documents are central to "how the state comes to be imagined, encountered, and reimagined by the population" [Hull 2012: 260]. A great example here might be Anderson's paper capitalism or census—map — museum institutions of state power [Anderson 2006].

Still these explanations are left for the reader's consideration, as the author supposes that performative and authoritative functions of documents are developed through document circulation and mediation (and probably more books should be written on this issue). Matthew Hull centers his methodological focus on document circulation three reasons: the historical establishment of "Kaghazi Raj" or "Document Rule" in colonial times; the fact that bureaucrats and their clients themselves suggest the practices of document production and circulation as essential; and his own observation data [Hull 2013: 441]. The last two issues originate from his field experience, so "the proof is in the pudding." But the first issue might need some clarification.

One of the main strengths of the south-eastern colonial rule of the British Empire was the quasi-governmental functions of the English East India Company. The company faced many problems, among which accountability of the remote territories was quite possibly the hardest part. Therefore, in 1621 it established the *Lawes of Standing Orders of the East India Company*, which became a foundation for "Kaghazi Raj — a system of records developed from the documentation and communication practices of the English East India Company. As Hull concludes from that, the *Lawes* expressed a thorough-going rejection of trust in people (p. 8).

At the same time, the administrative posts were circulated not among the locals, but British officers, who obviously lacked local knowledge, famously named "*metis*" by James Scott [Scott 1998]. The implementation of the "rule of paper" was a way to increase the same accountability. This is quite in tune with Weber's ideas that bureaucracy originates from a combination of legal authority and compulsory organization[3].

[3] "Anstalt" in German, which is also translated as "institution".

Kaghazi Raj, in that sense, was not simply an instrument of bureaucratic organizations, but rather a constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, and even the organization of the state itself. This generative capacity of documents to "to make things come into being" [Hull 2012: 256] is a great contribution to government and state establishment.

"Regrettably, your planet is One of Those Scheduled for Demolition"[4]

Hull claims that the "spatial organization of the [Islamabad] city and its whole construction was an attempt to create an autonomous state actor by cutting the entanglements of the state bureaucracy with Pakistani society (p. 35) and that the city *plan* was an effort to use spatial isolation to engineer a social isolation of government servants from a wider population (p. 67). This was done by the organization of the ICTA and CTA, which would deal with claims and requests of the citizens on a variety of city and state-related subjects.

A 22-grade CDA hierarchy aimed at efficient civil service provision, and therefore assigned *file* as a "workhorse". But among other important functions, we can suggest that documents here are meant to be a medium for the following:

— State spatialization and territoriality;
— Establishment of state sovereignty;
— Governmentality practices;
— "Seeing" the nation.

State territoriality operates in three ways: through classifications of space, through a sense of place, and through the enforcement of control over space (by means of surveillance and legitimization) [Hansen, Stepputat 2001]. Mapping the areas, the state may imply physical and discursive control over them and become a spatial matrix into which subjects are slotted and in which the national economy, polity, and society are made [Massey, Allen, Sarre 1999; Sharma, Gupta 2006]. The development of maps and geography allowed the state to distinguish and control its borders, to guarantee geopolitical security, to overcome localisms, to inculcate a love of country, and to provide a basis for development planning [Hansen, Stepputat 2001: 144].

Giving our attention to the city *maps,* the author highlights that maps "don't state over or against a reality they represent, they are entangled into prosaic practices through which the city is planned, constructed, regulated and inhabited" (p. 212–213). In that sense, maps articulate legitimate forms of sociality as they combine with the state policies. Hull goes into detail with this function of maps by discussing different practices of mosque construction.

Islamabad city was planned according to a clear geometrical structure of Greek architect Constantinos Doxiadis in 1959. The sector-by-sector city construction assumed that each of the hierarchically organized sectors would have a mosque according to the number of inhabitants and their status. However, in real life, mosques became objects of contestation, both as symbols of religious community and sources of state patronage (pp. 220). In the late 1970s, competing sects erected mosques just on the open land without any authorization of the CDA. These attempts of squatting faced different responses — some of the mosques were demolished, but some were taken over. As a result, bureaucratic maps became eventually detached from the actual city organization.

Hull argues that new maps could be redrawn only after a critical number of map inscriptions, which had accumulated in files and letters. The detachment of physical place representation from an information device

[4] Adams D. (2009) *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, New York: Del Ray.

might demonstrate the leaks of the "transparent map" approach (where maps are culturally neutral representations of material reality). At the same time, according to the "opaque map" approach, maps articulated the sociopolicial status of a nation/religious group/commercial practice/city government as sociocultural constructions (pp. 230–231). Interestingly, Hull admits that the CDA officers would rather believe old maps and records on the land development than the actual evidence from city dwellers, which is a demonstration of the state establishment as well. All in all, new maps of Islamabad (or of its particular sectors) were divorced from neighborhood settlement, but mediated the complicated set of relations between the government, citizens, and city planners.

The establishment of state sovereignty can be tracked through *petitions* and *parchis*[5]. These two common types of documents are quite opposite for Pakistani bureaucratic practices: parchis are material elements of connections with powerful supporters that people present to officers, while petitions are normative documents of citizen's direct and open approach to government (p. 64). While parchis testify to a personal connection of a writer to an influential person, petitions are autonomous writings articulating a just case (pp. 102–103). Consequently, parchis are in value for a unique investment of the writer into a bearer, petitions link to education and wealth of the bearer (which are indexed by the quality of the production) (p. 93).

Hull mentions that according to diaries of a late-nineteenth-century observer in colonial India, the nation had "a great faith in the efficacy of the written appeals" (pp. 89–90). The situation has not changed much: it is still a common-sense idea that even the smallest actions of the government are done at the behest of senior politicians and officials.

Why is it so? This is likely because petitions decreased informality in the work of state institutions and gave rise to democratic concepts. We could assume here the classical contradiction between formal institutions and informal social networks (or social capital). The latter is autonomous from a former to a much greater extent than the other way around. Therefore, the abundance of social capital makes it possible to get along with "less state", while filling the lack of social capital with state control and formal institutions may prove ineffective, and the two work complementarily rather than interchangeably [Polishchuk, Menyashev 2011]. The same thing happens within Pakistan bureaucracy: although parchis and petitions are very different in their ideas[6], in practice they work together.

Both parchis and petitions encourage social relations between citizens, bureaucrats, and supplicants to boost or suspend certain cases. These relations are intended to start from the sovereignty of the state and its citizens (and moreover, the new capital, city of Islamabad, initially was constructed to divide people from the government and thus simplify the governing). But in accordance with empirical facts, administrative control and the construction of subjects/objects assume the presence of actors originally not linked by the network of existing relations. Documents not only establish the sovereignty, but imply governmentality practices and give the state a capacity to "see".

As mentioned above, the assumptions about what signs are and how they function form certain semiotic ideologies. The material qualities of signs, the sorts of agents involved in them and roles of human intentions, and material causations, agreements upon document production and circulation characterize graphic ideologies. These are important for Hull's analysis, as they imply patterns of use, discursive characteristics, graphic conventions, material form and interpretative framework for particular graphic genres: from files and plans to office manuals (pp. 13–15).

[5] Parchis are scraps of paper with the visitor's name, position, and occasion of visit usually presented to the CDA officer or his secretary right before the meeting. In Russian realities we could talk of a specific form of business cards.

[6] As the author notes, parchis signalize proximity, and petitions substitute it (p. 87).

As documents engage with people, places, and things to form bureaucratic objects, one might speak of "*bureaucratic semiotic technologies*" — the means by which government dominates the populace. But the more abstract the ideas are, the more mediators it requires to build links to empirical objects (p. 170). The administration of land and writing *lists* clearly demonstrates that written artifacts are more persuasive and influential than the real-life snapshots.

Hull gives an example of "dummy house" construction. "Dummy houses" are the houses that were never built to be lived in, but were built to be counted. An ultimate goal for these houses is to get compensation for their demolition, which is essential for the purposes of land development. Dummy houses are obviously fraudulent practices that allow particular individuals making a fortune. But if the case ever ends up in a court, the physical absence of the house may be not as significant as the physical presence of mass documentation testifying for its presence (p. 205).

The politics of representation has a vast material component, and bureaucratic semiotic technologies are means of populace domination by the government. The whole ambitious project of Doxiadis was in building a hierarchy of communities from a smallest gathering to the whole, functional differentiation and subdivision into five levels. The spatial order was a prerequisite and condition of a social order, as new inhabitants were organized by the bureaucratic hierarchy, and not any other type of social community significant for Pakistan (e. g., family, religion, ethnicity, regional affiliation, and wealth) (p. 53).

Another significant example is *file* creation and circulation. CDA files usually consisted of notes, copies of the relevant documents, and some additional maps/plans/etc. Files were recognized as a "chronicle of [their] own production" — things that were not in a file simply did not exist for the CDA officers (p. 115). Simultaneously, file authorship was more of a source of anxiety — the bureaucratic organization of CDA file circulation was good at simulating performance and work in general.

Writing a lot and saying nothing (new) was a common (and legitimate) way to escape individual responsibility, as when the file moved through a chain of offices, it turned into a record of activities of all the involved actors. The collective responsibility for the file creation and mediation sabotaged any potential individual actions, and Hull names a number of moves toward such de-individualization: no future tense in official documentation ("the request is to be approved"), the use of passive voice, the avoidance of singular pronouns ("we" instead of "I"), the almost magical power of signatures, the placing of requests in documentation[7], and many more[8].

As files initially become artifacts (and some of them may be "current" for decades), and laymen should never get involved with them, any attempts of a client to gain access to a file or to control its movement create great possibilities for illegal activities among junior clerks (p. 156). Files enact authoritative decisions, and file copies trigger new stories. The ambitious project of accountability gains its own interpretations and resolutions when implemented into local circumstances.

The resulting hybrid of formal and informal, material and symbolic, individualized and collectivized, transparent and opaque... (one could continue this list with many more characteristics) is neither a national feature, nor a state bureaucracy hallmark. As Graeber has demonstrated, the omnipresence of bureaucratic practices and documentation cult work both for free and regulated market systems, the onlypreconddditions needed are structural violence and decreased imagination [Graeber 2015]. This is not a hard thing to do when there is so much paperwork around.

[7] Compare "Pl put up draft" and "DFA is submitted please". The first one is written by a Deputy Director, the second one by a Town Planner (p. 143).

[8] The "bureaucratic language" is quite famous itself, and luckily has got its own book [Shuy 1998].

"It is no Use to Blame the Looking Glass if Your Face is Awry"[9]

The "graphic artefacts", which are material forms of documentation and communication, shape the governance process. Hull mentions two main ways the documents build associations: by the circulation of graphic artefacts inside and outside the bureaucracy (and occasionally involving outsiders or things that were never meant to be there into the bureaucratic practices), and by enacting bureaucratic objects and drawing them in through document circulation (p. 18). This is not an extraordinary situation for our own realities as well: consider a situation in which detailed information about a state organization CEO's bonus and total top-management's bounty becomes public at the same time as the annual financial report. Some numbers might seem overprized, some questions arise, and in a couple of months a criminal case is initiated — merely because several Ministries got involved into their own paperwork[10].

So how do documents actually involve with people, places, and things to make bureaucratic objects? It seems that Hull's answer is "ubiquitously", because that is the *participatory bureaucracy* he is talking about: Islamabad city did not actually separate bureaucracy from "society", but drew that society within the bureaucracy itself (p. 256).

Bureaucracies may be ivory towers that generate forms of knowledge and criteria detached from reality, from "Potemkin villages" to vague KPIs, which are counted in the number of comments and document remarks. Simultaneously, bureaucracies may let things slide and leave important matters undocumented, e. g., within the decision-making processes. Regardless, bureaucracies are built on *paper*: all the classical features/requirements—such as chain of command, hierarchy, division of labor, meritocracy — requite and reinforce practices of writing. Once you imply oral or gesture administration, you get the "Chinese whispers" game.

Here the reader might wonder why the "*Government of Paper*" got only one chapter in the "*political economy of paper*" (and even split that one with the *files*). But she can easily determine the principles of this system: although it is a mixture of individual and collective actions, individual functionaries are isolated, responsibilities are mixed and blurred. When personal connections and trust are not available, markets surpass reciprocity. The same happens with documents and word of mouth.

The relations of documents with what they speak about, and the way these relationships are constructed and mediated can truly enrich our understanding of how bureaucracies are enacted. As the author claims, "Eyes, minds and hands are to be replaced by satellites, computers and printers in an attempt to restrict the human role in referential practices to interpretation" (p. 257). The bitter truth is that bureaucracies do not require (or allow) any interpretative labor [Graeber 2015]. This monotonous technocratic work is a top-candidate for replacement with new technologies and maybe even techno-employees.

One might argue that the myth of a paperless office is dispelled, and the digital format will rather supplement than replace paper [Sellen, Harper 2002]. Regardless of the outcome, we will need to reconsider our documentation practices when they detach prom material forms of paper. Governments will have to become even more inventive and find a new ultimate power tool. Until then, "the pen is mightier than the sword."

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9 Cit: Gogol N. (1995) *The Inspector-General* (trans. from Russian by J. L. Seymour and G. R. Noyes), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (*Dover Publications*). Originally published: The Inspector. *In: Masterpieces of the Russian Drama* (ed. and trans. G. R. Noyes), New York; London: D. Appleton and Company, 1933.

10 Which was an exact case of Russian Post and its CEO Dmitry Strashnov at the end of 2016 — beginning of 2017. URL: https://meduza.io/en/news/2016/12/09/fsb-seizes-documents-from-russian-post

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