BUREAUCRATIC VIOLENCE

Introduction

Ethnographic Engagement with Bureaucratic Violence

Erin R. Eldridge and Amanda J. Reinke

■ **ABSTRACT:** Bureaucracies are dynamic and interactive sociocultural worlds that drive knowledge production, power inequalities and subsequent social struggle, and violence. The authors featured in this special section mobilize their ethnographic data to examine bureaucracies as animated spaces where violence, whether physical, structural, or symbolic, manifests in everyday bureaucratic practices and relationships. The articles span geographic contexts (e.g., United States, Canada, Chile, Eritrea) and topics (e.g., migration, extractive economies, law and sociolegal change, and settler colonialism) but are bound together in their investigation of the violence of the administration of decisions, care, and control through bureaucratic means.

■ **KEYWORDS:** bureaucracy, bureaucratic violence, continuum of violence, ethnography, policy, power, social suffering

Defying commonly held perceptions, anthropological studies have revealed that bureaucracies are not simply mundane, stagnant administrative structures. They are, as Anya Bernstein and Elizabeth Mertz argue, interactive sociocultural worlds where decisions are made, knowledge is created, and power is exerted in ways that affect the everyday lives of citizens. Ethnography is thus well suited for unveiling the “humanness” and everyday realities of bureaucratic practice and interactions (2011: 7). In an introduction to a set of articles on bureaucracy, Laura Bear and Nayanika Mathur recently illustrated the effectiveness of ethnographic approaches as they explored how the enactment of certain utopian goals or “new public goods” embodying values such as austerity, transparency, and decentralization can change bureaucratic organizations, shape social struggles, and produce unexpected outcomes. For example, Mathur’s study of the overhaul of India’s welfare system based on “good governance” strategies, namely austerity and efficiency, uncovered how the goal of efficiency was undermined by underlying conflicts between established bureaucrats and newly contracted professionals with precarious relations to the state (2015: 22–25).

Highlighting bureaucracies as “animated spaces” that can produce unintended, sometimes violent, outcomes, these anthropologists and others have called for ethnographies of bureaucra-

cies that are more nuanced and robust, with emphasis on transparency and secrecy, paperwork, violence, class politics, and the fusion of public and private (Graeber 2015; Graeber et al. 2015). In response to this call, this collection of articles utilizes ethnographic inquiry and methodology to contribute to the growing literature on bureaucratic violence. Studies on the intersection of bureaucracy and violence uncover dynamic spaces where state and bureaucratic organizations exert force and social control and engender struggle across multiple scales. Expanding the scholarship on social suffering (Kleinman et al. 1997) and the bureaucratic production of indifference (Herzfeld 1992), for example, Akhil Gupta (2012) revealed the dynamic roles of the state and its bureaucrats in creating and reinforcing structural violence. By focusing on arbitrary decision-making among bureaucrats, corruption, and the significance of inscription, Gupta exposed the ways in which systems of care designed to address social suffering systematically reproduce and normalize violence.

Bureaucratic violence is therefore not merely an outcome of abstract structures, as the articles in this section show, but is administered through processes of decision-making, paperwork, knowledge production, inaction, and exclusion (see Gupta 2012; Rajan 2001; Tyner and Rice 2016). The authors draw on and contribute to theories of bureaucracy and bureaucratization by considering the dynamic ways in which both bureaucrats and the infrastructures within which they work interact with, shape, and are influenced by the citizens they serve. Constructed and implemented by individuals working within a state or organizational structure, bureaucracies are comprised of people making decisions and creating knowledge that can perpetuate violence on the public in myriad ways. Thus, this section builds on ethnographies of bureaucracy and violence to analyze the decidedly human element that creates, interprets, and influences the forms, structures, and public discourse of bureaucracy.

We additionally investigate how violence intimately, and often invisibly, entangles with bureaucratic relations and can manifest in a multitude of forms along the violence continuum (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004), encompassing often overlapping dimensions of physical, structural (Farmer 2004), symbolic (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2004), and slow violence (Nixon 2011). As noted by James Tyner and Stian Rice (2016: 40; also Graeber 2015: 58), bureaucracies—as structures of violence—“provide context for physical violence.” The articles in this section reveal the state’s physical violence via colonialism, incarceration, and failure to investigate human rights violations. Structural violence is administered through systems that fail to provide adequate access to resources, such as effective legal counsel, effective transnational legal mechanisms, safe housing and environments, and other basic rights and needs. As bureaucratic infrastructures socially control a populace and regulate life itself, states and their bureaucrats seed symbolic violence—an internalization of violence by the oppressed as normative. Thus, the administration of decisions, care, and control through bureaucratic processes simultaneously affects our physical, social, and mental-emotional well-being. The authors in this section thus reveal the multilateral and dynamic bureaucratic infrastructures that exact this continuum of violence on populations in a variety of geographic contexts while also closely examining bureaucrats and the individuals affected by their daily decision-making.

Recognizing anthropology’s unique position to interrogate the intersection of bureaucracy and violence, we aim to reveal relationships that can impact both theory and practice beyond traditional anthropological settings. Contributing to the critical turn in transitional justice studies (see Jones and Brudholm 2016), Jaymelee Kim analyzes bureaucratic violence and power dynamics amid transitional justice processes (TJ) in Canada. Collected over a period of 12 months, her ethnographic data illustrates the complex power relations among TJ facilitators, nonprofits, government officials, and the Indigenous communities these processes were meant to serve. In particular, Kim highlights the ways in which TJ exists as an extension of colonial

bureaucracies by challenging Indigenous identity and acknowledging only particular narratives of violence while ignoring ongoing human rights violations. Contrary to goals of justice and reconciliation, TJ processes, in this context, are entwined with the physical and psychological violence of Indian Residential Schools, bureaucratic inaction toward cases of missing Indigenous women and children, ongoing disputes over land and resources, and the continued marginalization of First Nations.

In her article, Eliza Guyol-Meinrath Echeverry examines multiple dimensions of violence imposed through Canadian-based corporate development projects in other countries, as well as novel attempts to hold Canadian corporations accountable for actions abroad. Specifically, Guyol-Meinrath Echeverry examines two civil court cases in Canada, *Caal v. Hudbay* and *Aray v. Nevsun*, to uncover changing relationships among corporations, law, extractive economies, and international human rights. Just as Kim situates the violence of TJ processes into a historical context of settler colonial violence, Guyol-Meinrath Echeverry contextualizes development-induced abuses in Guatemala and Eritrea into complex, historically based systems of violence. These two cases, which relate to sexual violence in Guatemala and forced labor in Eritrea, respectively, reveal dynamic changes to Canadian jurisdiction and the limitations and potential of bureaucratic mechanisms to address the systemic forces that undergird human rights violations.

With a similar emphasis on the complex interplay among bureaucracies, industries, and lived experience, Erin Eldridge examines the dynamic role that government regulations and bureaucratic institutions play in shaping on-the-ground experiences and realities of communities affected by coal ash waste in the Southeastern United States. Through ethnographic investigation and policy analysis, Eldridge exposes the ways in which policy processes normalize coal ash dangers and hazardous landscapes. Furthermore, she illustrates how social and ecological violence is administered through corporate-state collaborations and bureaucratic inaction and delays. Both Guyol-Meinrath Echeverry and Eldridge highlight how bureaucracies can produce uneven legal contexts that place great burdens on citizens attempting to hold corporations accountable and the ways in which governments beholden to neoliberal rationales fail to protect the citizenry from the violence and externalities of extractive economies as industries push against regulations and oversight.

The articles by Amanda Reinke and Megan Sheehan utilize ethnographic insights to analyze everyday interactions with state and nonstate bureaucracies. Reinke draws on ethnographic research in California and Virginia to investigate tensions and conflicts over the bureaucratization of alternative justice practices. Working with restorative justice (RJ) practitioners, she analyzes how bureaucratic processes, such as standardizing and professionalizing these ostensibly informal conflict resolution mechanisms, serve to entrench rather than mitigate violence and marginalization in the legal system. In this case, the absence of formal bureaucratic mechanisms creates a legitimization crisis in RJ practices. Indicative of the “hyper-credentialized world” where “nothing is real that cannot be quantified” (Graeber 2015: 41–42), the need to capture data to justify RJ practices has violent implications through the shift in focus from restorative processes to measurable outcomes.

Similarly, Sheehan’s article highlights the centrality of documentation. In Chile, official documents are pivotal to one’s ability to legally “exist” as a migrant, but unattainable documents in the private housing sector place individuals in precarious and unsafe housing conditions. Sheehan draws from 18 months of fieldwork in Santiago to analyze the multilateral articulations of bureaucracy that migrants encounter. Migrants in this context strive to access formal visas and residency documents through a rational bureaucratic process, but they are unable to access formal housing or rental agreements because of neoliberal bureaucratic obstacles and a

highly deregulated housing market. Through her work, we see the contrast between the idealized “postal utopia” (Graeber 2015: 153–166) and the realities of everyday encounters with bureaucratic structures. Whereas lengthy and complicated bureaucratic encounters with the state stand between migrants and a variety of resources required to procure a secure existence in the country, government absence in the housing market further marginalizes migrants.

Collectively, these articles investigate new ways of knowing bureaucratic violence at multiple levels (e.g., local, national, transnational) in diverse geographic contexts and the ways in which bureaucracy, otherwise theorized as mundane, becomes a site of active contestation and agentic activity imbued with violence. The authors highlight the need to analyze not only the significance of the bureaucratic structures themselves (following Graeber and others) but also processes of bureaucratization—slow processes that we can watch from the inside and outside. Perhaps most importantly, the authors in this section demonstrate the value of emic perspectives and ethnographic insights in unveiling multiple forms of violence entangled with bureaucratic presence (e.g., documents, paperwork, legal processes, regulations) and bureaucratic absence (e.g., inaction, delays, and the lack of representation, regulations, and enforcement) that pervade everyday life. Through considerations of bureaucratic presence and absence, with an analytical eye toward the reach of state power and the temporality and substance of bureaucratic work, the authors apply their ethnographic data to further theorize bureaucracies and bureaucratic structures as violent within the communities they seek to serve.

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