

## The bureaucratisation of utopia: ethics, affects and subjectivities in international governance processes

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## Introduction

### The Bureaucratization of Utopia: Ethics, Affects and Subjectivities in International Governance Processes

Julie Billaud and Jane K. Cowan

Bureaucracies, whether national or international, have rarely been conceived as ‘utopian’ sites. On the contrary, classic representations tend to describe bureaucratic formations as ‘rationality machines’, administrations as homogeneous black boxes and bureaucrats as individuals working ‘without hatred or passion’ (Weber 1968: 225) to implement a broader vision of which they remain largely ignorant. In her powerful report from the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, Arendt (2006) portrayed the Nazi civil servant responsible for organizing the deportation of European Jews not as a vile sociopath animated by anti-Semitic hatred but rather as an unremarkable bureaucrat blindly dedicated to the regime, motivated by his need to belong and his desire to be professionally promoted. Arendt subtitled her account ‘A Report on the Banality of Evil’ to underline how an ordinary person could commit horrendous crimes, not as a result of ideological indoctrination but rather, of unquestioning compliance with the law and an unwillingness ‘to think’: that is, to think critically and reflectively about the consequences of his own (here, bureaucratic) actions.

Helen Phillips’ dystopian novel *The Beautiful Bureaucrat* (2017) extends the trope of the totalitarian bureaucratic machine through her depiction of a Kafkaesque world of data processing where thinking is expressly discouraged. The novel’s main character, Josephine, is employed in a gigantic windowless concrete structure with maze-like corridors, tasked with feeding huge quantities of names and numbers into ‘the Database’. When she asks about the meaning of all this data and the purpose of

collecting it, her questions are dismissed. She is reminded: 'Remember, you need the Database as much as the Database needs you!' Set in a claustrophobic environment suffocated by nonsensical administrative routines, the novel offers a bitter fable of contemporary office work configured by late capitalism's tyrannical management techniques.

Representations of coercive administrations equally dominate the sociological and anthropological scholarship on bureaucracy initiated by Weber (1968). Bureaucratic institutions are depicted as either lubricants for market forces (Graeber 2015), or as epicentres for the 'social production of indifference' (Herzfeld 1992) and the reaffirmation of power imbalances and structural violence (Gupta 2012). The most recent anthropological scholarship on audit (Power 1999; Strathern 2000), policy (Shore, Wright, and Pero 2013) and governance by indicators (Merry 2011; Merry et al. 2015) analyzes how bureaucratic processes shape the parameters of human agency in far more intimate ways than the ones described by Max Weber. Building on Foucault's conceptualization of power/knowledge and adopting a 'governmentality' approach, many scholars present these systems of governance not as simply disciplinary but as producing calculative, responsabilised, self-managed subjects who form part of productive new sets of relations and regimes of truth.

The idea for this special issue emerged out of a feeling of unease with such renderings which, although providing important elements of understanding about the nature of bureaucratic power and its effects, do not fully reflect the insights we gained through ethnographic fieldwork and archival research in international bureaucracies. Indeed, the people we encountered in our research were seldom cynically detached; more often, they were actively engaged in implementing the 'public good'. It seems to us that dominant frameworks of analysis, inspired by governmentality approaches or

Actor Network Theory (Riles 2004; Latour 2010), leave little room for considering the many forms of contestation and resistance inherent to the social life of administrations. They also tend to conceal what slips out of, does not fit within or gets lost in the files, the formulas and the administrative procedures. Building on the ‘new anthropology of bureaucracy’ (Bear and Mathur 2015; Best 2012; Hull 2012; Hetherington 2011) which aims to bring nuance to these somewhat totalizing accounts, this special issue focuses on international governance processes as key social arenas of negotiation of divergent utopian ideals.

### **Why a focus on ‘utopia’?**

This collection continues a conversation initiated by Laura Bear and Nayanika Mathur who urge us to examine bureaucracies ‘as an expression of a contract between citizens and officials that aim to generate a utopian order’ (Bear and Mathur 2015: 18). The legitimacy of bureaucracies, they note, ‘rests on claims that they manifest a constitutional order and exist for the public good’ (Bear and Mathur 2015: 18), yet as they also observe, the many actors involved may hold diverse notions of what ‘the public good’ might be. Focusing in their own work on Indian state bureaucracies’ engagement with citizens under conditions of austerity (Bear 2015, Mathur 2015), they are especially concerned to highlight how ‘the public good’ has come to be defined through the model of late capitalism. Such a model privileges the values of efficiency, transparency, fiscal discipline, decentralisation and marketization and aims to foster a lean state and individualised, entrepreneurial subjects. The vision of the public good promoted by late capitalism now prevails globally: the desirability of the values it privileges is taken by many as self-evident and natural, in a manner that

obscures their ideological underpinnings and the politics of the supposedly neutral technocratic means to implement them. Bear and Mathur ‘push back against [this] contemporary powerful economic definition of the public good’ (2015: 20), even as they recognise its profound effects in transforming national and international institutions. Citing Bear’s research with shipyard workers on the Hooghly River, they highlight how citizen-subjects may counter this economic conception with alternative ones, emphasising kinship or communal solidarities as well as collective, rather than simply individual, ‘goods’. We join them in this pushing back, emphasising that such contestation does not come only from citizen-subjects. Indeed, the actors we investigate come primarily from within the bureaucratic ranks: they too often strive for versions of the public good that privilege non-economic values, such as justice, peace, an international spirit, humanity and community participation.

That ‘utopian goals’—named explicitly by Bear and Mathur as ‘the public good’ (2015:18)—are an ‘undeveloped theme’ in the anthropology of bureaucracy is not surprising given that most researchers are examining *state bureaucracies*, in the context of a profoundly critical anthropology of the state. With so much evidence of state violence, corruption and capture of the state by special interests, scholars have found it difficult to remember—or at least, to take seriously—the idealistic *raison d’être* of state bureaucracy. International organizations instantiate a different kind of political project: typically steeped in idealism yet contained by states’ strong hold on sovereignty. The focus of most of our contributors on actors working in international organizations allows the exploration of distinctive bureaucratic subjectivities forged in these settings. Like the Finnish Red Cross humanitarians studied by Liisa Malkki (2015) as well as those described by Julie Billaud (this issue), who find motivation in the value of internationalism and the idea of ‘global responsibility’, international

bureaucrats tend to be conscious of their responsibilities toward a ‘bigger world out there’, a theme that resonates strongly in Cowan’s article in this issue (see also the contributors to Niezen and Sapignoli 2017). This sustains their sense of belonging and commitment to the international project, even though their universalistic ideals are constantly frustrated.

As diplomatic and administrative epicentres of international governance, international bureaucracies have since their inception followed the spatial and temporal orientation of utopias. Literally ‘utopic’, from the ancient Greek ‘ou-topos’ (‘not a place’ or ‘nowhere’), international bureaucracies enact a de-territorialized model of governance that aims for universality and whose authority derives from everywhere and thus beyond any sovereign ‘somewhere’. They can equally be considered (via a creative, albeit inaccurate, etymology) as a ‘eu-topos’ or ‘good place’ for envisaging the ‘global public good’. Temporally, their utopianism is future-oriented, anchored in a perpetual striving for social improvement to be achieved through legal reasoning, scientific evidence and technological interventions.

In their transformative agenda, one can detect the legacy of a tradition of thought emerging with the beginning of modernity, which started to understand social structures as resulting from human agency rather than God’s will, and which sought to imagine alternative societies where a happy life could be possible (Levitas 2003). Indeed, international bureaucracies function as ‘palaces of hope’ (Niezen and Sapignoli 2017) where dreams for a better life and a transformed future for all human beings are methodically cultivated in a manner somewhat similar to what Ernst Bloch calls ‘educated hope’: a dialectical movement between reason and passion whose objective is to educate desire through the cultivation of ‘militant optimism’ (Levitas 1990).

Although such activities provide a sense of direction and generate hopes in a possible better world, the imperative to maintain a ‘gloss of harmony’ (Muller 2013) - among countries, across agencies and agendas—that guides much international and global governance simultaneously triggers frustrations and disillusionment. Such sentiments can be exacerbated when efforts for justice, transparency and accountability primarily take the form of intensive and repetitive bureaucratic labours such as drafting reports, formulating recommendations and attending meetings. Indeed, the very means by which the mechanisms of international governance seek to achieve ‘the good’ often prevent its full realization. The ideal, and the inventiveness it fosters among the many actors it mobilises, may end up being either lost in the paperwork and the files or diverted and constantly postponed.

Globalisation, too, has inevitably affected the international project and its efforts toward universal coherence. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has argued that the arrival of ‘liquid modernity’—marked by deregulation, flexibilization and the privatization of the good—has reduced the possibilities of articulating a cohesive and comprehensive programme for changing the world order. The locus of utopian energies has consequently shifted: squeezed into interstitial spaces, utopian projects have become smaller in scale, fragmentary and partial (Bauman 2003).

The human rights phenomenon illustrates Bauman’s claim particularly well. According to Samuel Moyn (2010), human rights represent ‘the last utopia’. It is only in the mid-1970s that human rights became household words and turned into the global social movement we know today. They emerged as an alternative ‘public good’ to previous universalistic and utopian schemes widely deemed to have ‘failed’ (revolutionary socialism) or no longer relevant (anticolonial nationalism). As a project, human rights represent a limited (as well as the latest) universalistic utopia,

aiming to guarantee minimal standards of a decent life for individuals without challenging broader structures of inequality; yet as global economic inequality reaches grotesque levels, scholars are increasingly emphatic that human rights are ‘not enough’ (Moyn 2018; Marks 2011). In the meantime, human rights are supported through a system of oversight by international law monitoring mechanisms which encourages state compliance with their human rights obligations. Yet even these operations are constantly challenged by the shrinking resources allocated to the UN mechanisms charged to carry out this task, as Halme-Tuomisaari demonstrates in her study of the UN Human Rights Committee (this issue).

Human rights increasingly entail the same kind of anti-politics that can be observed in contemporary humanitarianism. As Billaud’s and Mora’s contributions highlight (this issue), humanitarian and ‘rule of law’ institutions do not seek to transform societies; rather, they seek to contain disorder so as to avoid its overflows. Babul’s contribution (this issue) reminds us, nonetheless, of the importance of context and contingency: the introduction of human rights discourse in Turkey as the only available language for dissent after the 1980 coup led to a ‘contextually specific translation of human rights’, associated with socialism and radical left critique, which endures, even after the Turkish state, under pressure from the European Union, began from 2007 inculcating its civil servants in a de-politicized version of human rights values as an instrument for good governance. Individuals both within and outside Turkish governance activities continue to mobilise radical political interpretations of human rights.

The articles gathered in this volume provide various illustrations of the precarious nature of utopias imagined in the context of international governance processes. In *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing



argues that precarity has become a constitutive feature of our time. Tsing defines precarity as a condition of being vulnerable to others, one marked by indeterminacy and absence of control. Acknowledging precarity challenges the narrative of constant progress on which international governance relies for its legitimacy; at the same time, it reminds us of the ‘indeterminacy [that] also makes life possible’ (Tsing 2015, 20). Tsing’s discussion inspires us to attend to the unexpected within the mundane and laborious bureaucratic procedures that international governance sets in motion. Being able to notice uncertainty and ambiguity in the midst of repetitive bureaucratic processes that officially aim at rationalizing the world opens up space for surprise and for the ‘prospective momentum entailed in anticipation of what has not-yet become’ (Miyazaki 2006, 14).

### **Affective bureaucracies**

The authors in this special issue examine diverse utopian projects from the perspective of actors directly or indirectly involved in their implementation via their participation in global (including but not limited to international and transnational) institutional processes. We pay close attention to the working methods and ethos of actors (social movement activists, NGOs, civil servants, diplomats, delegates, technocrats, experts, legal practitioners) enmeshed in the everyday bureaucratic practices set in motion by these complex mechanisms. Drawing inspiration from the anthropological literature on the affective life of the state which emphasises the multiple and contingent emotions officials maintain toward the administrations they are supposed to represent (Navaro-Yashin 2002; 2007; 2006; Laszczkowski and Reeves 2015; Aretxaga 2003), we examine how actors both reproduce and subvert

efforts of rationalization in their everyday bureaucratic routines. By exploring the affective life of bureaucracies, we seek to understand how actors maintain a sense of purpose and agency in spite of the tedious and burdensome nature of the administrative procedures in which they take part. We maintain that exploring their working methods, subjectivities and moral dilemmas can bring nuances to studies that treat bureaucracies as embodying ‘the disenchantment of the world’ and provides a fertile ground for understanding the moral economy that guides contemporary bureaucratic practices. Indeed, exploring subjectivities in relation to practices widens the scope of possibilities for revealing the lines of struggle that are hidden from view in analyses that focus solely on bureaucratic procedures, forms, rationalization and standardization methods.

More specifically, this collection explores the tensions between actors’ moral commitment to various utopian ideals and the pragmatic actions they undertake in order to realize them. Brought together, these articles tell an interesting story of human ingenuity as actors aim to make the most out of often arduous processes. They also tell a story of the many contingencies that prevent the utopia of a better world from being fully realised. International governance processes offer an ideal location from which to observe the ‘frictions’ (Tsing 2005) between a wide range of actors, technologies and bureaucratic practices, at varying scales, and noticing what they nonetheless generate.

The six articles in the special issue can be read together as various illustrations of the strategies and struggles of actors involved in bureaucratic machineries of international governance. Each article highlights the pressures actors face as they navigate between diverging utopian inspirations and the modalities of administrative procedures that both enable and constrain action. We group the articles in dialogic

pairs so as to highlight the specific affective regimes and moral economies mobilized in the realization of the global good. The first two address ideals of ‘community participation’ (Bortolotto et al.) and ‘minority protection’ (Cowan) and highlight the creative strategies bureaucrats devise in order to enlarge their scope of action. The second pair discuss ideals of ‘civilian protection’ (Billaud) and ‘property restitution’ (Mora) and underlines the tensions and contradictions that emerge when actors operate within the suspended humanitarian timeframe of emergency and transition. The final pair explore ideals of universal human rights and the difficulties encountered by their guardians as a result of changing politics (Babül) and an ambiguous institutional framing (Halme-Tuomisaari).

### **Realizing the utopias of ‘minority protection’ at the League of Nations and of ‘community participation’ at the UNESCO**

Jane Cowan focuses on international civil servants working in the Administrative Commissions and Minorities Section of the League of Nations Secretariat between 1920-1939. Via archival research and analysis of interviews with individuals who worked in the League’s secretariat, she retrieves these first international bureaucrats’ understandings, logics, motivations and feelings about their work. Animated by the feeling of ‘pursuing an ideal’ (to preserve peace) and a passionate commitment to building an ‘international spirit’, League civil servants developed a work ethos grounded in belief in the power of ‘quiet diplomacy’ – as opposed to the one of ‘transparency’ which guides contemporary governance - to achieve the League’s protection objectives. Participating with enthusiasm in the League ‘experiment’, they relied on informality, discretion, personal persuasion, ‘principled improvisation’ and

‘cautious creativity’ as they worked out pragmatic ways to carry out their tasks within an international bureaucracy that was not yet fully bureaucratised. Strikingly, it is at this moment of inventing the international that utopian aspirations for peace and international cooperation were especially strong, guiding the sensibilities and practices of many League bureaucrats as they sought to make real an institution whose contours were still evolving.

Chiara Bortolotto, Philipp Demkensi, Panas Karampampas and Simone Toji concentrate on bureaucrats in charge of realizing the utopian ideal of community participation in the context of the implementation of the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The authors characterise these actors as ‘vocational bureaucrats’ (as opposed to detached administrators), that is, highly qualified experts with experience in the development sector or in NGO activism, who tweak their own procedures so as to achieve the higher goal they understand themselves to be serving. Conceiving national heritage bureaucracies in Brazil, China and Greece together with UNESCO’s administration as an arena for political action rather than a machine designed to maintain the status quo, the authors highlight a mode of engagement with heritage policy marked by passion, enthusiasm and a sense of responsibility in realizing the ideal of participation. In spite of the many bureaucratic constraints imposed on them, heritage bureaucrats use the cracks in the system to reconcile their own convictions and utopian visions with the political realities they face in their work.

**The limited humanitarian utopias of ‘property restitution’ in Kosovo and ‘civilian protection’ at the International Committee of the Red Cross**

Julie Billaud's article describes the work of delegates working for the International Committee of the Red Cross and tasked with implementing the organization's international mandate as 'Guardian of the Geneva Convention', in the context of increasing administrative pressures related to evidence-based programming. By contrast with the dominant anthropological literature on humanitarianism which seeks to analyse the disciplinary forces that permeate humanitarian governance (Fassin 2012; Ticktin 2011), she argues that the current conflation of the imperative of protection with that of accountability has created systems of bureaucratic management relying on governance at a distance which tend to maintain disorder instead of offering solutions to it. The utopia of 'civilian protection', with its objective of re-establishing 'humanity' in the midst of violence and suffering, is therefore a fundamentally fragmented and partial project. Relying on the hope in the possibility of communication, the ritual of 'confidential dialogue' – the organization's trademark– increasingly involves immaterial modes of field presence which ironically make the 'humans' it is supposed to serve disappear from view.

The same minimalistic logic permeates the EULEX mission in Kosovo described by Agathe Mora and the property restitution mandate it is tasked to implement via the Kosovo Property Agency. Operating within the 'black hole' of a partially recognized and literally utopian state (in the ancient Greek sense of *ou-topos* as 'nowhere') where legal instability dominates in a permanent transitional scenario, national and international legal professionals were left with no other option than to continuously negotiate between reasonableness and legality. The unrecognised status of the independent state and the competition between various national and supranational jurisdictions led them to opt for 'good enough' ad hoc technical

measures, for lack of concrete possibilities to overcome the constraining limitations of the transitional justice framework. Ironically, while Kosovo was supposed to embody the utopia of a new state where human rights would be available to all, the logic of legal suspension that dominates the black hole state has led only to the delivery of rough justice.

### **Guarding the utopia of universal human rights at the UN and in Turkey**

Miia Halme-Tuomisaari's study of the UN Human Rights Committee (the body of experts that monitors implementation of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) offers a compelling account of how the translation of the 1940s utopian vision of world justice based on international law into ongoing cycles of documentation and monitoring has paradoxically created a bureaucratic system whose success largely depends on states' failure to comply with their reporting obligations. The financial constraints the Committee faces, together with its contested legal authority, deeply challenge these human rights experts' capacity to effectively implement their mandate. Struggling to maintain the hope in a possible better world, these 'guardians of utopia', as Halme-Tuomisaari calls them, maintain a sense of professionalism, belief and engagement—despite their frustrations—by seeking to act as progressive interpreters of the Covenant, using the scope opened by 'General Comments' procedures. While the enormous amount of detail makes such discussions seem utterly boring to the outsider, the exercise is riveting and a source of joy for the experts who have mastered the language of the law and legal technicalities.

Finally, the case of Turkey under EU accession conditionalities documented by Elif Babül demonstrates that human rights rhetoric introduced in the 1980s

opened up an agonistic space, which was thereafter rather difficult to close again, in spite of bureaucratic interventions since 2007 – in the form of trainings – devised to turn them into mere instruments of ‘good governance’. Because of a lack of agreement over their meaning, the bureaucratization and mainstreaming of human rights carried out in the context of EU-harmonization policies did not lead to their de-radicalization. In this sense, the utopia of human rights in Turkey remains literally utopian, in the sense of something that cannot exist in reality but which nevertheless remains an aspiration and a source of political mobilisation.

## **Conclusion**

The contributions gathered in this special issue bring to light how the original utopian ideals of bureaucracies, as sites through which to organize collective action, remain alive in international organizations, in spite of the plethora of administrative procedures which constrain and prevent their full realization. These ideals are kept alive by the various actors (international civil servants, activists, delegates, legal experts, state representatives) who take part in bureaucratic processes and who collaborate or compete against each other in attempting to implement their own vision of utopia.

Dominant anthropological accounts of bureaucracy focusing on the state tend to underestimate actors’ affective attachment to the principles and ideals that the administrations for which they work or with which they interact are supposed to embody. If this tendency can be partly explained by the infringement of late capitalism’s logic in the everyday work of state bureaucracies, the theoretical framing of governmentality leaves little room for envisioning the possibility of change and transformation. Paradoxically, this framing also tends to support dominant political

discourses that use the narrative of bureaucracies' consubstantial slowness and supposed inefficiency to justify neoliberal policies aimed at minimising the state and privatizing public services.

A focus on international organizations enables us to recapture the progressive political projects for which bureaucracies were initially established. By drawing attention to actors' creative strategies and affective engagement as they struggle with procedures and modalities, we want to bring to view meaningful forms of endurance in the face of quick neoliberal reforms. We argue that such forms of resistance should be conceived as 'weapons of the weak' deployed at a moment when the 'global public good' is threatened by conservative politics and economic forces.

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