Dead zones of the imagination

On violence, bureaucracy, and interpretive labor

David Graeber

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Contents

Abstract

The experience of bureaucratic incompetence, confusion, and its ability to cause otherwise intelligent people to behave outright foolishly, opens up a series of questions about the nature of power or, more specifically, structural violence. The unique qualities of violence as a form of action means that human relations ultimately founded on violence create lopsided structures of the imagination, where the responsibility to do the interpretive labor required to allow the powerful to operate oblivious to much of what is going on around them, falls on the powerless, who thus tend to empathize with the powerful far more than the powerful do with them. The bureaucratic imposition of simple categorical schemes on the world is a way of managing the fundamental stupidity of such situations. In the hands of social theorists, such simplified schemas can be sources of insight; when enforced through structures of coercion, they tend to have precisely the opposite effect.

This essay is an exploration of certain areas of human life that have tended to make anthropologists uncomfortable: those areas of starkness, simplicity, obliviousness, and outright stupidity in our lives made possible by violence.[1] By "violence" here, I am not referring to the kind of occasional, spectacular acts of violence that we tend to think of first when the word is invoked, but again, the boring, humdrum, yet omnipresent forms of structural violence that define the very conditions of our existence, the subtle or not-so-subtle threats of physical force that lie behind everything from enforcing rules about where one is allowed to sit or stand or eat or drink in parks or other public places, to the threats or physical intimidations or attacks that underpin the enforcement of tacit gender norms.

Let us call these *areas of violent simplification.* They affect us in almost every aspect of our lives. Yet no one likes to talk about them very much. Indeed, one might argue that social theorists seem to have a particular aversion to dealing with the subject because it raises profound issues of the status of social theory itself, and anthropologists dislike talking about them most of all, because anthropologists are drawn, above all, to what might be called *areas of symbolic richness or density of meaning*, where "thick description" becomes possible. The preference is understandable. But it tends to warp our perceptions of what power actually is, and how it operates, in ways that are both decidedly self-serving, and that in overlooking structural blindness, effectively become forms of structural blindness themselves.

Let me begin with a brief story about bureaucracy.

Over the last year my mother had a series of strokes. It soon became obvious that she would eventually be incapable of living at home without assistance; since her insurance would not cover home care, a series of social workers advised us to put in for Medicaid. To qualify for Medicaid however, one's total worth can only amount to six thousand dollars. We arranged to transfer her savings—this was, I suppose, technically a scam, though it's a peculiar sort of scam since the

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[1] This essay is based on the 2006 Malinowski Memorial Lecture entitled "Beyond power/knowledge: An exploration of the relation of power, ignorance and stupidity." It is a substantially revised version of the one that, for some years, was available online at the LSE website. This version is now meant to be considered the official one for reference purposes.

government employs thousands of social workers whose main work seems to be telling citizens how to do it—but shortly thereafter, she had another very serious stroke, and found herself in a nursing home undergoing long-term rehabilitation. When she emerged from there she would definitely need home care, but there was a problem: her social security check was being deposited directly, she was barely able to sign her name, so unless I acquired power of attorney over her account and was thus able to pay her monthly rent bills for her, the money would immediately build up and disqualify her, even after I filled out the enormous raft of Medicaid documents I needed to file to qualify her for pending status.

I went to her bank, picked up the requisite forms, and brought them to the nursing home. The documents needed to be notarized. The nurse on the floor informed me there was an in-house notary, but I needed to make an appointment; she picked up the phone and put me through to a disembodied voice who then transferred me to the notary. The notary proceeded to inform me that I first had to get authorization from the head of social work, and hung up. So I acquired his name and room number and duly took the elevator downstairs, appeared at his office—only to discover he was, in fact, the disembodied voice on the phone. The head of social work picked up the phone, said "Marjorie, that was me, you're driving this man crazy with this nonsense and you're driving me crazy too," and proceeded to secure me an appointment for early the next week.

The next week the notary duly appeared, accompanied me upstairs, made sure I'd filled out my side of the form (as had been repeatedly emphasized to me), and then, in my mother's presence, proceeded to fill out her own. I was a little puzzled that she didn't ask my mother to sign anything, only me, but I figured she must know what she was doing. The next day I took it to the bank, where the woman at the desk took one look, asked why my mother hadn't signed it, and showed it to her manager who told me to take it back and do it right. Apparently the notary had no idea what she was doing. So I got new forms, filled out my side of each, and made a new appointment. On the appointed day the notary duly appeared, and after some awkward remarks about the difficulties caused by each bank having its own, completely different power of attorney form, we proceeded upstairs. I signed, my mother signed—with some difficulty—and the next day I returned to the bank. Another woman at a different desk examined the forms and asked why I had signed the line where it said to write my name and printed my name on the line where it said to sign.

> "I did? Well, I just did exactly what the notary told me to do."
>
> "But it says clearly 'signature' here."
>
> "Oh, yes, it does, doesn't it? I guess she told me wrong. Again. Well…all the information is still there, isn't it? It's just those two bits that are reversed. So is it really a problem? It's kind of pressing and I'd really rather not have to wait to make another appointment."
>
> "Well, normally we don't even accept these forms without all the signatories being here in person."
>
> "My mother had a stroke. She's bedridden. That's why I need power of attorney in the first place."

She said she'd check with the manager, and after ten minutes returned (with the manager hanging just within earshot in the background) to announce the bank could not accept the forms

in their present state—and in addition, even if they were filled out correctly, I would still need a letter from my mother's doctor certifying that she was mentally competent to sign such a document.

I pointed out that no one had mentioned any such letter previously.

"What?" the manager suddenly interjected. "Who gave you those forms and didn't tell you about the letter?"

Since the culprit was one of the more sympathetic bank employees, I dodged the question, noting instead that in the bankbook it was printed, quite clearly, "in trust for David Graeber." He of course replied that would only matter if she was dead.

As it happened, the whole problem soon became academic: my mother did indeed die a few weeks later.

At the time, I found this experience extremely disconcerting. Having led an existence comparatively insulated from this sort of thing, I found myself continually asking my friends: is this what ordinary life, for most people, is really like? Most were inclined to suspect it was. Obviously, the notary was unusually incompetent. Still, I had to spend over a month, not long after, dealing with the ramifying consequences of the act of an anonymous clerk in the New York Department of Motor Vehicles who inscribed my given name as "Daid"—not to mention the Verizon clerk who spelled my surname "Grueber." Bureaucracies public and private appear—for whatever historical reasons—to be organized in such a way as to guarantee that a significant proportion of actors will not be able to perform their tasks as expected. It also exemplifies what I have come to think of as the defining feature of certain utopian forms of practice: that is, ones where those maintaining the system, on discovering that it will regularly produce such failures, conclude that the problem is not with the system itself but with the inadequacy of the human beings involved—or, indeed, of human beings in general.

As an intellectual, probably the most disturbing thing was how dealing with these forms somehow rendered me stupid too. How could I not have noticed that I was printing my name on the line that said "signature" and this despite the fact that I had been investing a great deal of mental and emotional energy in the whole affair? The problem, I realized, was that most of this energy was going into a continual attempt to try to understand and influence whoever, at any moment, seemed to have some kind of bureaucratic power over me—when all that was required was the accurate interpretation of one or two Latin words, and a correct performance of certain purely mechanical functions. Spending so much of my time worrying about how not to seem like I was rubbing the notary's face in her incompetence, or imagining what might make me seem sympathetic to various bank officials, made me less inclined to notice when they told me to do something foolish. It was an obviously misplaced strategy, since insofar as anyone had the power to bend the rules they were usually not the people I was talking to; moreover, if I did encounter them, I was constantly being reminded that if I did complain, even about a purely structural absurdity, the only possible result would be to get some junior functionary in trouble.

As an anthropologist, probably the most curious thing for me was how little trace any of this tends to leave in the ethnographic literature. After all, we anthropologists have made something of a specialty out of dealing with the rituals surrounding birth, marriage, death, and similar rites of passage. We are particularly concerned with ritual gestures that are socially efficacious: where the mere act of saying or doing something makes it socially true. Yet in most existing societies at this point, it is precisely paperwork, rather than any other forms of ritual, that is socially efficacious. My mother, for example, wished to be cremated without ceremony; my

main memory of the funeral home though was of the plump, good-natured clerk who walked me through a fourteen-page document he had to file in order to obtain a death certificate, written in ballpoint on carbon paper so it came out in triplicate. "How many hours a day do you spend filling out forms like that?" I asked. He sighed. "It's all I do," holding up a hand bandaged from some kind of incipient carpal tunnel syndrome. But without those forms, my mother would not be, legally—hence socially—dead.

Why, then, are there not vast ethnographic tomes about American or British rites of passage, with long chapters about forms and paperwork? There is an obvious answer. Paperwork is boring. One can describe the ritual surrounding it. One can observe how people talk about or react to it. But when it comes to the paperwork itself, there just aren't that many interesting things one can say about it.

Anthropologists are drawn to areas of density. The interpretative tools we have at our disposal are best suited to wend our way through complex webs of meaning or signification: to understand intricate ritual symbolism, social dramas, poetic forms, or kinship networks. What all these have in common is that they tend to be both infinitely rich, and, at the same time, open-ended. If one sets out to exhaust every meaning, motive, or association packed in to a single Swazi Ncwala ritual, Balinese cockfight, Zande witchcraft accusation, or Mexican family saga, one could easily spend a lifetime; and quite a number of them, if one also sought to trace the fan of relations with other elements in the larger social or symbolic fields such work invariably opens up. Paperwork in contrast is designed to be maximally simple and self-contained. Even when forms are complex, even bafflingly complex, it's by an endless accretion of very simple yet apparently contradictory components, like a maze made out the endless juxtaposition of two or three very simple geometrical elements. And like a maze, it doesn't really open on anything outside itself. As a result, there just isn't very much to interpret. A Geertzian "thick description" of a mortgage application, for example, would not really be possible, no matter how dense the document. Even if some defiant soul set out to write one just to prove it could be done, it would be even harder to imagine anyone actually reading it.

II

Novelists often do manage to make great literature out of the apparent circularity and emptiness, not to mention idiocy, of bureaucracy—but largely by embracing it, and producing literary works that partake of something like the same mazelike, senseless form. As a result, almost all great literature on the subject takes the form of horror-comedy. Franz Kafka's *The trial* (1925) is of course the paradigm, but one can cite any number of others: from Stanislaw Lem's *Memoirs found in a bathtub* (1961), which is pretty much straight Kafka, to Ismail Kadare's *Palace of dreams* (1980), Saramago's *All the names* (1999), or work that's simply informed by the bureaucratic spirit (e.g., almost anything by Jorge Luis Borges). Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), which takes on military bureaucracies, and *Something happened* (1974), about corporate bureaucracies, are considered latter-day masterworks in this genre. As is David Foster Wallace's *The pale king* (2011), an imaginative meditation on the nature of boredom set in a Midwestern office of the US Internal Revenue Service. It's interesting that just about all these works of fiction not only emphasize the comic senselessness of bureaucratic life, but mix it with at least undertones of

violence. That is to say, they emphasize the very aspects most likely to be sidestepped in the social scientific literature.

Now it's true there are works of anthropology that echo some of these themes: one thinks, for instance, of Jack Goody's reflection on the idea of the list in *The domestication of the savage mind* (1977), which is just as much about the birth of self-enclosing bureaucratic systems of classification as Roland Barthes' *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971) is about the moment such logic came to be applied—at least imaginatively—to absolutely every corporeal aspect of human life: passions, sexual acts, or religious devotion. But most are not explicitly about bureaucracy at all. Within the anthropological literature on bureaucracy itself, in turn, there are works that echo something of the absurdist mode so prevalent in literature: Matthew Hull's work on paperwork as ritual (2008, 2010, 2012), Akhil Gupta's recent *Red tape* (2012), which directly takes on the failures of Indian bureaucracies to alleviate poverty, or Andrew Mathews' work on the Mexican forestry service (2005, 2011). But these are somewhat exceptional. The real core of the anthropological literature on bureaucracy, even at the height of the "literary turn," took the completely opposite direction, asking not why bureaucracy produces absurdity, but rather, why so many people believe this is the case. The single best-known anthropological work on bureaucracy is Michael Herzfeld's *The social production of indifference* (1992), which begins by framing the question thusly:

> [I]n most industrial democracies—where the state is supposed to be a respecter of persons—people rail in quite predictable ways against the evils of bureaucracy. It does not matter that their outrage is often unjustified; what counts is their ability to draw on a predictable image of malfunction. If one could not grumble about "bureaucracy," bureaucracy itself could not easily exist: both bureaucracy and the stereotypical complaints about it are parts of a larger universe that we might call, quite simply, the ideology and practice of accountability. (1992: 3)

To understand the system in cultural terms—that is, to find the areas of symbolic richness, rife for anthropological analysis, where its victims can represent themselves as Christlike, for example, and imagine local officials as embodiments of Oriental Despotism—one has to move out of the offices entirely and into the cafes.

> The symbolic roots of Western bureaucracy are not to be sought, in the first instance, in the official forms of bureaucracy itself, although significant traces may be discovered there. They subsist above all in popular reactions to bureaucracy—in the ways in which ordinary people actually manage and conceptualize bureaucratic relations. (1992: 8)[2]

This is not to say Herzfeld and others who have followed in his wake (e.g., Navaro-Yashin 2002) explicitly deny that immersion in bureaucratic codes and regulations can, in fact, cause people to act in ways that in any other context would be considered idiotic. Just about anyone is aware from personal experiences that they regularly do. Yet for purposes of cultural analysis, truth is rarely considered an adequate explanation. At best one can expect a "yes, but…"—with the assumption that the "but" introduces everything that's really interesting and important: for instance, the way that complaints about that idiocy subtly act to reinscribe the complainers as

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[2] For a good recent summary of the anthropological literature on bureaucracy, see Hoag (2011).

subjects within the same moral field of accountability that bureaucrats inhabit, the way this creates a certain conception of the nation, and so on.

When we move away from ethnography and enter more rarified domains of social theory, even that "yes, but" has been known to disappear. In fact, one often finds a remarkable sympathy—dare one say, sense of affinityp—between scholars, who generally double as academic bureaucrats, and the bureaucrats they study. Consider the hegemonic role, in US social theory, of Max Weber in the 1950s and 1960s, and of Michel Foucault since the 1970s. Their popularity, no doubt, had much to do with the ease with which each could be adopted as a kind of anti-Marx, their theories put forth (usually in crudely simplified form) to argue that power is not simply or primarily a matter of the control of production but rather a pervasive, multifaceted, and unavoidable feature of any social life. I also think it is no coincidence that these sometimes appear to be the only two intelligent people in human history that honestly believed that bureaucracy is characterized primarily by its effectiveness. Weber saw bureaucratic forms of organization—public and private—as the very embodiment of impersonal rationality, and as such, so obviously superior to all other possible forms of organization that they threatened to engulf everything, locking humanity in a joyless "iron cage," bereft of spirit and charisma (1958: 181). Foucault was more subversive, but in a way that made bureaucratic power more effective, not less. In his work on asylums, clinics, prisons, and the rest, bodies, subjects—even truth itself—all become the products of administrative discourses. Through concepts like governmentality and biopower, state bureaucracies end up shaping the parameters of human existence in ways far more intimate than anything Weber might have imagined.

It's hard to avoid the conclusion that, in either case, their popularity owed much to the fact that the American university system during this period had itself become increasingly an institution dedicated to producing functionaries for an imperial administrative apparatus on a global scale. During the Cold War, this was often fairly explicit, especially in the early years when both Boasians like Mead and Benedict and Weberians like Geertz often found themselves operating within the military-intelligence apparatus, or even funded by CIA fronts (Ross 1998).[3] Gradually, over the course of the campus mobilizations of the Vietnam War, this kind of complicity was made an issue. Max Weber—or, to be more accurate, that version of Weber promoted by sociologists like Parsons and Shils (1951), which gradually became the basis for State Department "modernization theory"—came to be seen as the embodiment of everything radicals wished to reject. But it wasn't long before Foucault, who had been whisked out of his retreat in Tunisia and placed in the Collège de France after the uprising of May 1968, began to fill the gap. One might even speak here of the gradual emergence of a kind of division of labor within American universities, with the optimistic side of Weber reinvented (in even more simplified form) for the actual training of bureaucrats under the name of "rational choice theory," while his pessimistic side was relegated to the Foucauldians. Foucault's ascendancy, in turn, was precisely within those fields of academic endeavor that both became the haven for former radicals, and

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[3] Just to give a sense of the connections here, Geertz was a student of Clyde Kluckhohn at Harvard, who was not only "an important conduit for CIA area studies funds" (Ross 1998), but had contributed the section on anthropology to Parsons and Shils' famous Weberian manifesto for the social sciences, *Toward a general theory of action* (1951). Kluckhohn connected Geertz to MIT's Center for International Studies, then directed by the former CIA Director of Economic Research, which in turn convinced him to work on development in Indonesia. The Center had as its declared aim the development of "an alternative to Marxism" largely through what came to be known as modernization theory (White 2007)—again, on Weberian grounds.

were almost completely divorced from any access to political power—or, increasingly, from any influence on social movements as well. This gave Foucault's emphasis on the "power/knowledge" nexus—the assertion that forms of knowledge are always also forms of social power, indeed, the most important forms of social power—a particular appeal.

No doubt, any such pocket historical summary can only be a bit caricaturish and unfair. Still, I think there is a profound truth here. It is not just that we are drawn to areas of density, where our skills at interpretation are best deployed. We also have an increasing tendency to identify what's interesting with what's important, and to assume places of density are also places of power. The power of bureaucracy shows just how much this is often not the case.

This essay is not, however, primarily about bureaucracy—or even about the reasons for its neglect in anthropology and related disciplines. It is really about violence. What I would like to argue is that situations created by violence—particularly structural violence, by which I mean forms of pervasive social inequality that are ultimately backed up by the threat of physical harm—invariably tend to create the kinds of willful blindness we normally associate with bureaucratic procedures. To put it crudely: it is not so much that bureaucratic procedures are inherently stupid, or even that they tend to produce behavior that they themselves define as stupid, but rather, that they are invariably ways of managing social situations that are already stupid because they are founded on structural violence. I think this approach allows potential insights into matters that are, in fact, both interesting and important: for instance, the actual relationship between those forms of simplification typical of social theory, and those typical of administrative procedures.

III

We are not used to thinking of nursing homes or banks or even HMOs as violent institutions—except perhaps in the most abstract and metaphorical sense. But the violence I'm referring to here is not epistemic. It's quite concrete. All of these are institutions involved in the allocation of resources within a system of property rights regulated and guaranteed by governments in a system that ultimately rests on the threat of force. "Force," in turn, is just a euphemistic way to refer to violence.

All of this is obvious enough. What's of ethnographic interest, perhaps, is how rarely citizens in industrial democracies actually think about this fact, or how instinctively we try to discount its importance. This is what makes it possible, for example, for graduate students to be able to spend days in the stacks of university libraries poring over theoretical tracts about the declining importance of coercion as a factor in modern life, without ever reflecting on that fact that, had they insisted on their right to enter the stacks without showing a properly stamped and validated ID, armed men would indeed be summoned to physically remove them, using whatever force might be required. It's almost as if the more we allow aspects of our everyday existence to fall under the purview of bureaucratic regulations, the more everyone concerned colludes to downplay the fact (perfectly obvious to those actually running the system) that all of it ultimately depends on the threat of physical harm.

Actually, one could make the same argument about the way that the term "structural violence" itself is deployed in contemporary social theory—because the way I am using it here is quite decidedly unconventional. The term itself traces back to debates within Peace Studies in the 1960s; it was coined by Johann Galtung (1969, 1975; cf. Lawler 1995), to meet the charge that

to define "peace" as the mere absence of acts of physical assault is to overlook the prevalence of much more insidious structures of human exploitation. Galtung felt the term "exploitation" was too loaded, owing to its identification with Marxism, and proposed as an alternative "structural violence"—i.e., any institutional arrangement that, by its very operation, regularly causes physical or psychological harm to a certain portion of the population, or imposes limits on their freedom. Structural violence could thus be distinguished from both "personal violence" (violence by an identifiable human agent) and "cultural violence" (those beliefs and assumptions about the world that justify the infliction of harm). This is the how the term has mainly been taken up in the anthropological literature as well (e.g., Bourgois 2001; Farmer 2004, 2005; Gupta 2012). Paul Farmer, for instance, writes that he found the term apt in describing the suffering and early death of so many of the poor Haitian farmers among whom he worked and treated,

> because such suffering is "structured" by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that conspire—whether through routine, ritual, or, as is more commonly the case, the hard surfaces of life—to constrain agency. For many, including most of my patients and informants, choices both large and small are limited by racism, sexism, political violence, *and* grinding poverty. (Farmer 2002: 40)

In all these formulations, "structural violence" is treated as structures that have violent effects, whether or not actual physical violence is involved. This is actually quite different from my own formulation, more consonant with the feminist tradition (e.g., Scheper-Hughes 1992; Nordstrom and Martin 1992), which sees these more as structures *of* violence—since it is only the constant fear of physical violence that makes them possible, and allows them to have violent effects. Racism, sexism, poverty, these cannot exist except in an environment defined by the ultimate threat of actual physical force. To insist on a distinction only makes sense if one wishes, for some reason, to also insist that there *could* be, for example, a system of patriarchy that operated in the total absence of domestic violence, or sexual assault—despite the fact that, to my knowledge, no such system has ever been observed.

Given the world as it actually exists, this clearly makes no sense. If, say, there is a place where women are excluded from certain spaces for fear of physical or sexual assault, what precisely is achieved by making a distinction between actual attacks, the fear those attacks inspire, the assumptions that motivate men to carry out such assaults or police to feel the victim "had it coming," and the resultant feeling on the part of most women that these are not the kind of spaces women really ought to be in? Or, for that matter, to distinguish all of these, in turn, from the "economic" consequences of women who cannot be hired for certain jobs as a result. They all form a single structure of violence.[4]

The ultimate problem with Galtung's approach, as Catia Confortini (2006) notes, is that it views "structures" as abstract, free-floating entities; when what we are really referring to here are material *processes*, in which violence, and the threat of violence, play a crucial, constitutive role. In fact one could argue it's this very tendency toward abstraction that makes it possible for

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[4] Hence feminists often note out that "violence against women is structural" (e.g., Fregoso 2010: 141; World March of Women 2009) in the sense that actual physical attacks and threats underpin the very institutions and arrangements that can then be described as "structural violence" because of their effects. Similarly, Confortini (2006: 350) observes that once one understands "structures" as material processes, one can see not only that "direct violence is a tool used to build, perpetuate, and reproduce structural violence," but makes possible our very categories of masculinity and femininity to begin with. Hartsock (1989) makes analogous points in her critique of Foucault.

everyone involved to imagine that the violence upholding the system is somehow not responsible for its violent effects.

Anthropologists would do well not to make the same mistake.

All this becomes even clearer when one looks at the role of government. In many of the rural communities anthropologists are most familiar with, where modern administrative techniques are explicitly seen as alien impositions, many of these connections are much easier to see. In the part of rural Madagascar where I did my fieldwork, for example, that governments operate primarily by inspiring fear was seen as obvious. At the same time, in the absence of any significant government interference in the minutiae of daily life (via building codes, open container laws, the mandatory licensing and insurance of vehicles, and so on), it became all the more apparent that the main business of government bureaucracy was the registration of taxable property. One curious result was that it was precisely the sort of information that was available from the Malagasy archives for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for the community I was studying—precise figures about the size of each family and its holdings in land and cattle (and in the earlier period, slaves)—that I was least able to attain for the time I was there, simply because that was precisely what most people assumed an outsider coming from the capital would be likely to be asking about, and therefore, that which they were least inclined to tell them.

What's more, one result of the colonial experience was that which might be called "relations of command"—basically, any ongoing relationship in which one adult renders another an extension of his or her will—had become identified with slavery, and slavery, with the essential nature of the state. In the community I studied, such associations were most likely to come to the fore when people were talking about the great slave-holding families of the nineteenth century whose children went on to become the core of the colonial-era administration, largely (it was always remarked) by dint of their devotion to education and skill with paperwork. In other contexts, relations of command—particularly in bureaucratic contexts—were linguistically coded. They were firmly identified with French; Malagasy, in contrast, was seen as the language appropriate to deliberation, explanation, and consensus-based decision-making. Minor functionaries, when they wished to impose arbitrary dictates, would almost invariably switch to French. I particularly remember one occasion when an official who had had many conversations with me in Malagasy, and had no idea I even understood French, was flustered one day to discover me dropping by at exactly the moment everyone had decided to go home early. "The office is closed," he announced, in French, "if you have any business you must return tomorrow at 8 AM." When I pretended confusion and claimed, in Malagasy, not to understand French, he proved utterly incapable of repeating the sentence in the vernacular, but just kept repeating the French over and over. Others later confirmed what I suspected: that if he had switched to Malagasy, he would at the very least have had to explain why the office had closed at such an unusual time. French is actually referred to in Malagasy as "the language of command"—it was characteristic of contexts where explanations, deliberation, and ultimately, consent, was not really required, since they were in the final analysis premised on the threat of violence.[5]

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[5] To be fair, one reason that so many who use the term "structural violence" imagine that it is possible to have such structures unbacked by physical violence is that they are employing a typically liberal definition of "violence" as physical attacks on others, or even a typically conservative definition of violence as unauthorized damage to persons of property, rather than the more typically radical definition of violence as including *threats* of physical attack (Coady 1986; cf. Graeber 2009: 448–49.)

In Madagascar, bureaucratic power was somewhat redeemed in most people's minds by its tie to education, which was held in near-universal esteem. Comparative analysis suggests there is a direct relation, however, between the level of violence employed in a bureaucratic system, and the level of absurdity it is seen to produce. Keith Breckenridge (2008), for example, has documented at some length the regimes of "power without knowledge," typical of colonial South Africa, where coercion and paperwork largely substituted for the need for understanding African subjects. The actual installation of apartheid in the 1950s, for example, was heralded by a new pass system that was designed to simplify earlier rules that obliged African workers to carry extensive documentation of labor contracts, substituting a single identity booklet, marked with their "names, locale, fingerprints, tax status, and their officially prescribed 'rights' to live and work in the towns and cities" (Breckenridge 2005: 84), and nothing else. Government functionaries appreciated it for streamlining administration, police for relieving them of the responsibility of having to actually talk to African workers—the latter universally referred to as the *dompas* (or "stupid pass"), for precisely that reason. Andrew Mathews' (2005, 2011) brilliant ethnography of the Mexican forestry service in Oaxaca likewise demonstrates that it is precisely the structural inequality of power between government officials and local farmers that allows foresters to remain in a kind of ideological bubble, maintaining simple black-and-white ideas about forest fires (for instance), that allow them to remain pretty much the only people in Oaxaca who don't understand what effects their regulations actually have.

There are traces of the link between coercion and absurdity even in the way we talk about bureaucracy in English. Note, for example, how most of the colloquial terms that specifically refer to bureaucratic foolishness—SNAFU, Catch-22, and the like—derive from military slang. More generally, political scientists have long observed a "negative correlation," as David Apter (1965, 1971) put it, between coercion and information: that is, while relatively democratic regimes tend to be awash in too much information, as everyone bombards political authorities with explanations and demands, the more authoritarian and repressive a regime, the less reason people have to tell it anything—which is why such regimes are forced to rely so heavily on spies, intelligence agencies, and secret police.

IV

Violence's capacity to allow arbitrary decisions, and thus to avoid the kind of debate, clarification, and renegotiation typical of more egalitarian social relations, is obviously what allows its victims to see procedures created on the basis of violence as stupid or unreasonable. One might say, those relying on the fear of force are not obliged to engage in a lot of interpretative labor, and thus, generally speaking, do not.

This is not an aspect of violence that has received much attention in the burgeoning "anthropology of violence" literature. The latter has tended instead to move in exactly the opposite direction, emphasizing the ways that acts of violence are meaningful and communicative. Neil Whitehead, for instance, in a recent collection simply entitled *Violence* (2004), goes so far as to insist that anthropologists need to examine why people are ever wont to speak of "meaningless violence" at all. Violence, he suggests, is best understood as analogous with poetry:

> Violent actions, no less than any other kind of behavioral expression, are deeply infused with cultural meaning and are the moment for individual agency within historically embedded patterns of behavior. Individual agency, utilizing extant cultural forms, symbols, and icons, may thus be considered "poetic" for the rule-governed substrate that underlies it, and for how this substrate is deployed, through which new meanings and forms of cultural expression emerge. (Whitehead 2004: 9–10)

When I object to this emphasis on the meaningful nature of violence, I'm not trying to suggest that the fundamental point is in any way untrue. It would be absurd to deny that acts of violence are, typically, meant as acts of communication, or that they tend to be surrounded by symbols and generate myths. Yet it seems to me that, just as in the case of bureaucracy, this is an area where anthropologists are particularly inclined to confuse interpretive depth with social significance: that is, to assume that the most interesting aspect of violence is also, necessarily, the most important. Yes, violent acts tend to have a communicative element. But this is true of any other form of human action as well. It strikes me that what is really important about violence is that it is perhaps the only form of human action that holds out even in the possibility of having social effects *without* being communicative.

To be more precise: violence may well be the only form of human action by which it is possible to have relatively predictable effects on the actions of a person about whom you understand nothing. Pretty much any other way one might try to influence another's actions, one at least has to have some idea who they think they are, who they think you are, what they might want out of the situation, and what their aversions and proclivities are. Hit them over the head hard enough and all of this becomes irrelevant.

It is true that the effects one can have by disabling or killing someone are very limited, but they are real enough—and critically, it is possible to know in advance exactly what they will be. Any alternative form of action cannot, without some sort of appeal to shared meanings or understandings, have any predictable effects at all. What's more, while attempts to influence others by the threat of violence do require some level of shared understanding, these can be pretty minimal. Most human relations—particularly ongoing ones, whether between longstanding friends or longstanding enemies—are extremely complicated, dense with experience and meaning. Maintaining them requires a constant and often subtle work of interpretation, of endlessly imagining others' points of view. Threatening others with physical harm allows the possibility of cutting through all this. It makes possible relations of a far more schematic kind (i.e., "cross this line and I will shoot you"). This is of course why violence is so often the preferred weapon of the stupid. Indeed, one might say it is one of the tragedies of human existence that this is the one form of stupidity to which it is most difficult to come up with an intelligent response.

I do need to introduce one crucial qualification here. If two parties engaged in a relatively equal contest of violence—say, generals commanding opposing armies—they have good reason to try to get inside each other's heads. It is really only when one side has an overwhelming advantage in their capacity to cause physical harm that they no longer need to do so. But this has very profound effects, because it means that the most characteristic effect of violence—its ability to obviate the need for what I would call "interpretive labor"—becomes most salient when the violence itself is least visible, in fact, where acts of spectacular physical violence are least likely to occur. These are situations of what I've referred to as structural violence, on the assumption that systematic inequalities backed up by the threat of force can be treated as forms of violence in

themselves. For this reason, situations of structural violence invariably produce extreme lopsided structures of imaginative identification.

These effects are often most visible when the structures of inequality take the most deeply internalized forms. A constant staple of 1950s American situation comedies, for example, was jokes about the impossibility of understanding women. The jokes (always, of course, told by men) represented women's logic as fundamentally alien and incomprehensible. One never had the impression the women in question had any trouble understanding men. The reasons are obvious: women had no choice but to understand men; this was the heyday of a certain image of the patriarchal family, and women with no access to their own income or resources had little choice but to spend a great deal of time and energy understanding what their menfolk thought was going on. Hopefully, at this point, I do not have to point out that patriarchal arrangements of this sort are prima facie examples of structural violence; they are norms sanctioned by the threat of physical harm in endless subtle and not-so-subtle ways. And this kind of rhetoric about the mysteries of womankind appears to be a perennial feature of them. Generations of women novelists—Virginia Woolf comes most immediately to mind (e.g., Woolf 1927)—have also documented the other side of such arrangements: the constant efforts women end up having to expend in managing, maintaining, and adjusting the egos of oblivious and self-important men, involve a continual work of imaginative identification, or what I've called "interpretive labor." This carries over on every level. Women are always expected to imagine what things look like from a male point of view. Men are almost never expected to reciprocate. So deeply internalized is this pattern of behavior that many men react to the suggestion that they might do otherwise, as if it were an act of violence in itself. A popular exercise among high school creative writing teachers in America, for example, is to ask students to imagine they have been transformed, for a day, into someone of the opposite sex, and describe what that day might be like. The results, apparently, are uncannily uniform. The girls all write long and detailed essays that clearly show they have spent a great deal of time thinking about the subject. Usually, a good proportion of the boys refuse to write the essay entirely. Those who do make it clear they have not the slightest conception what being a teenage girl might be like, and deeply resent having to think about it.[6]

Nothing I am saying here is particularly new to anyone familiar with Feminist Standpoint Theory or Critical Race Studies. Indeed, I was originally inspired to these broader reflections by a passage by bell hooks:

> Although there has never been any official body of black people in the United States who have gathered as anthropologists and/or ethnographers to study whiteness, black folks have, from slavery on, shared in conversations with one another "special" knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. Deemed special because it is not a way of knowing that has been recorded fully in written material, its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society. For years black domestic servants, working in white homes, acted as informants who brought knowledge back to segregated communities—details, facts, psychoanalytic readings of the white "Other." (hooks 1992: 165)

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[6] obviously, the immediate reason teenage boys object to imagining themselves as girls is homophobia; but one then has to ask why that homophobia is so powerful in the first place, and why it takes the form that it does. After all, many teenage girls are equally homophobic, but it does not seem to stop them from taking pleasure in imagining themselves as boys.

If there is a flaw in the feminist literature, I would say, it's that it can be, if anything, too generous, tending to emphasize the insights of the oppressed over the blindness or foolishness of their oppressors.[7]

Could it be possible to develop a general theory of interpretive labor? We'd probably have to begin by recognizing that there are two critical elements here that, while linked, need to be formally distinguished. The first is the process of imaginative identification as a form of knowledge, the fact that within relations of domination, it is generally the subordinates who are effectively relegated the work of understanding how the social relations in question really work. Anyone who has ever worked in a restaurant kitchen, for example, knows that if something goes terribly wrong and an angry boss appears to size things up, he is unlikely to carry out a detailed investigation, or even, to pay serious attention to the workers all scrambling to explain their version of what happened. He is much more likely to tell them all to shut up and arbitrarily impose a story that allows instant judgment: i.e., "you're the new guy, you messed up—if you do it again, you're fired." It's those who do not have the power to hire and fire who are left with the work of figuring out what actually did go wrong so as to make sure it doesn't happen again. The same thing usually happens with ongoing relations: everyone knows that servants tend to know a great deal about their employers' families, but the opposite almost never occurs. The second element is the resultant pattern of sympathetic identification. Curiously, it was Adam Smith, in his *Theory of moral sentiments* (1762), who first observed the phenomenon we now refer to as "compassion fatigue." Human beings, he proposed, are normally inclined not only to imaginatively identify with their fellows, but as a result, to spontaneously feel one another's joys and sorrows. The poor, however, are so consistently miserable that otherwise sympathetic observers face a tacit choice between being entirely overwhelmed, or simply blotting out their existence. The result is that while those on the bottom of a social ladder spend a great deal of time imagining the perspectives of, and genuinely caring about, those on the top, it almost never happens the other way around.

Whether one is dealing with masters and servants, men and women, employers and employees, rich and poor, structural inequality—what I've been calling structural violence—invariably creates highly lopsided structures of the imagination. Since I think Smith was right to observe that imagination tends to bring with it sympathy, the result is that victims of structural violence tend to care about its beneficiaries far more than those beneficiaries care about them. This might well be, after the violence itself, the single most powerful force preserving such relations.

V

All this, I think, has some interesting theoretical implications.

Now, in contemporary industrialized democracies, the legitimate administration of violence is turned over to what is euphemistically referred to as "law enforcement"—particularly, to police

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[7] The key texts on Standpoint Theory, by Patricia Hill Collins, Donna Haraway, Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock and others, are collected in a volume edited by Harding (2004). I might add that the history of this very essay provides a telling example of the sort of gendered obliviousness I'm describing. When I first framed the problem, I wasn't even aware of this body of literature, though my argument had clearly been indirectly influenced by it—it was only the intervention of a feminist friend, Erica Lagalisse, who put me on to where many of these ideas were actually coming from.

officers, whose real role, as police sociologists have repeatedly emphasized (e.g., Bittner 1970, 1985; Waddington 1999; Neocleous 2000), has much less to do with enforcing criminal law than with the scientific application of physical force to aid in the resolution of administrative problems. Police are, essentially, bureaucrats with weapons. At the same time, they have significantly, over the last fifty years or so, become the almost obsessive objects of imaginative identification in popular culture. It has come to the point that it's not at all unusual for a citizen in a contemporary industrialized democracy to spend several hours a day reading books, watching movies, or viewing TV shows that invite them to look at the world from a police point of view, and to vicariously participate in their exploits. If nothing else, all this throws an odd wrinkle in Weber's dire prophecies about the iron cage: as it turns out, faceless bureaucracies do seem inclined to throw up charismatic heroes of a sort, in the form of an endless assortment of mythic detectives, spies, and police officers—all, significantly, figures whose job is to operate precisely where the bureaucratic structures for ordering information encounter, and appeal to, genuine physical violence.

Even more striking, I think, are the implications for the status of theory itself.

Bureaucratic knowledge is all about schematization. In practice, bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae. Whether it's a matter of forms, rules, statistics, or questionnaires, it is always a matter of simplification. Usually it's not so different than the boss who walks into the kitchen to make arbitrary snap decisions as to what went wrong: in either case it is a matter of applying very simple preexisting templates to complex and often ambiguous situations. The result often leaves those forced to deal with bureaucratic administration with the impression that they are dealing with people who have, for some arbitrary reason, decided to put on a set of glasses that only allows them to see only two percent of what's in front of them. But doesn't something very similar happen in social theory? An ethnographic description, even a very good one, captures at best two percent of what's happening in any particular Nuer feud or Balinese cockfight. A theoretical work will normally focus on only a tiny part of *that*, plucking perhaps one or two strands out of an endlessly complex fabric of human circumstance, and using them as the basis on which to make generalizations: say, about the dynamics of social conflict, the nature of performance, or the principle of hierarchy. I am not trying to say there's anything wrong in this kind of theoretical reduction. To the contrary, I am convinced some such process is necessary if one wishes to say something dramatically new about the world.

Consider the role of structural analysis, so famously endorsed by Edmund Leach in the first Malinowski Memorial Lecture (1959) almost half a century ago. Nowadays structural analysis is considered definitively passé, and Claude Lévi-Strauss' corpus, vaguely ridiculous. This strikes me as unfortunate. Certainly the idea that structuralism provides some kind of genetic key to unlock the mysteries of human culture has been justifiably abandoned; but to likewise abandon even the practice of structural analysis, it seems to me, robs us of one our most ingenious tools. Because the great merit of structural analysis is that it provides a well-nigh foolproof technique for doing what any good theory should do, namely simplifying and schematizing complex material in such a way as to be able to say something unexpected. This is incidentally how I came up with the point about Weber and heroes of bureaucracy three paragraphs above. It all came from an experiment demonstrating structural analysis to students at a seminar in Yale; I had just laid out how vampires could be conceived as structural inversions of werewolves (and Frankenstein, of the Mummy), and someone suggested we try the same thing on other genres. I quickly estab-

lished, to my own satisfaction at least, that James Bond was a structural inversion of Sherlock Holmes. It was in mapping out the field that became visible once we set out that initial opposition that I came to realize that everything here was organized precisely around the relation between information and violence—just as one would expect for heroes of a bureaucratic age.

For my own part, I prefer to see someone like Lévi-Strauss as a heroic figure, a man with the sheer intellectual courage to pursue his model as far as it would go, no matter how obviously absurd the results could sometimes be—or, if you prefer, how much violence he thus did to reality.

As long as one remains within the domain of theory, then, I would argue that simplification can be a form of intelligence. The problems arise when the violence is no longer metaphorical. Here let me turn from imaginary cops to real ones. A former LAPD officer turned sociologist (Cooper 1991), observed that the overwhelming majority of those beaten by police turn out not to be guilty of any crime. "Cops don't beat up burglars," he observed. The reason, he explained, is simple: the one thing most guaranteed to evoke a violent reaction from police is to challenge their right to "define the situation." If what I've been saying is true, then this is just what we'd expect. The police truncheon is precisely the point where the state's bureaucratic imperative for imposing simple administrative schema, and its monopoly of coercive force, come together. It only makes sense then that bureaucratic violence should consist first and foremost of attacks on those who insist on alternative schemas or interpretations. At the same time, if one accepts Piaget's (1936) famous definition of mature intelligence as the ability to coordinate between multiple perspectives (or possible perspectives) one can see, here, precisely how bureaucratic power, at the moment it turns to violence, becomes literally a form of infantile stupidity.

If I had more time I would suggest why I feel this approach could suggest new ways to consider old problems. From a Marxian perspective, for example, one might note that my notion of "interpretive labor" that keeps social life running smoothly implies a fundamental distinction between the domain of social production (the production of persons and social relations) where the imaginative labor is relegated to those on the bottom, and a domain of commodity production where the imaginative aspects of work are relegated to those on the top. In either case, though, structures of inequality produce lopsided structures of the imagination. I would also propose that what we are used to calling "alienation" is largely the subjective experience of living inside such lopsided structures. This in turn has implications for any liberatory politics.[8] For present purposes, though, let me just draw attention to some of the implications for anthropology.

One is that many of the interpretive techniques we employ have, historically, served as weapons of the weak far more often than as instruments of power. In an essay in *Writing culture*, Renato Rosaldo (1986) made a famous argument that when Evans-Pritchard, annoyed that no one would speak to him, ended up gazing at a Nuer camp of Muot Dit "from the door of his tent," he rendered it equivalent to a Foucauldian Panopticon. The logic seems to be that any knowledge gathered under unequal conditions serves a disciplinary function. To me, this is absurd. Bentham's Panopticon was a prison. There were guards. Prisoners endured the gaze, and internalized its dictates, because if they tried to escape, or resist, they could be punished,

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[8] I have explored some of these implications—concerning both alienation and liberatory politics—further in an essay called "Revolution in reverse" (Graeber 2011).

even killed.[9] Absent the apparatus of coercion, such an observer is reduced to the equivalent of a neighborhood gossip, deprived even of the sanction of public opinion.

Underlying the analogy, I think, is the assumption that comprehensive knowledge of this sort is an inherent part of any imperial project. Even the briefest examination of the historical record though makes clear that empires tend to have little or no interest in documenting ethnographic material. They tend to be interested instead in questions of law and administration. For information on exotic marriage customs or mortuary ritual, one almost invariably has to fall back on travelers' accounts—on the likes of Herodotus, Ibn Battuta, or Zhang Qian—that is, on descriptions of those lands which fell outside the jurisdiction of whatever state the traveler belonged to.[10]

Historical research reveals that the inhabitants of Muot Dit were, in fact, largely former follows of a prophet named Gwek who had been victims of RAF bombing and forced displacement the year before (Johnson 1979, 1982, 1994)—the whole affair being occasioned by fairly typical bureaucratic foolishness (basic misunderstandings about the nature of power in Nuer society, attempts to separate Nuer and Dinka populations that had been entangled for generations, and so forth). When Evans-Pritchard was there they were still subject to punitive raids from the British authorities. Evans-Pritchard was asked to go to Nuerland basically as a spy. At first he refused, then finally agreed; he later said because he "felt sorry for them." He appears to have carefully avoided gathering the specific information the authorities were really after (mainly, about the prophets that they saw as leaders of resistance), while, at the same time, doing his best to use his more general insights into the workings of Nuer society to discourage some of their more idiotic abuses, as he put it, to "humanize" the authorities (Johnson 1982: 245). As an ethnographer, then, he ended up doing something very much like traditional women's work: keeping the system from disaster by tactful interventions meant to protect the oblivious and self-important men in charge from the consequences of their blindness.

Would it have been better to have kept one's hands clean? These strike me as questions of personal conscience. I suspect the greater moral dangers lie on an entirely different level. The question for me is whether our theoretical work is ultimately directed at undoing or dismantling some of the effects of these lopsided structures of imagination, or whether—as can so easily happen when even our best ideas come to be backed up by bureaucratically administered violence—we end up reinforcing them.

VI

Social theory itself could be seen as a kind of radical simplification, a form of calculated ignorance, meant to reveal patterns one could never otherwise be able to see. This is as true of this essay as of any other. If this essay has largely sidestepped the existing anthropological literature on

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[9] In fact, the way the image of the panopticon has been adopted in the academy, as an argument *against* the primacy of violence in contemporary forms of power, might be considered a perfect example of how academics can become complicit in the process by which structures founded on violence can represent themselves as something else.

[10] It would be interesting to document the ebb and flow of ethnographic interest within different historical empires to see if there are any consistent patterns. As far as I'm aware, the first large empire that gathered systematic ethnographic, culinary, medical, and similar information from within the empire were the Mongols.

bureaucracy, violence, or even ignorance,[11] it is not because I don't believe this literature offers insight, but rather because I wanted to see what different insights could be gained by looking through a different lens—or, one might even say, a different set of blinders.

Still, some blinders have different effects than others. I began the essay as I did—about the paperwork surrounding my mother's illness and death—to make a point. There are dead zones that riddle our lives, areas so devoid of any possibility of interpretive depth that they seem to repel any attempt to give them value or meaning. They are spaces, as I discovered, where interpretive labor no longer works. It's hardly surprising that we don't like to talk about them. They repel the imagination. But if we ignore them entirely, we risk becoming complicit in the very violence that creates them.

It is one thing to say that, when a master whips a slave, he is engaging in a form of meaningful, communicative action, conveying the need for unquestioning obedience, and at the same time trying to create a terrifying mythic image of absolute and arbitrary power. All of this is true. It is quite another to insist that is all that is happening, or all that we need to talk about. After all, if we do not go on to explore what "unquestioning" actually means—the master's ability to remain completely unaware of the slave's understanding of any situation, the slave's inability to say anything even when she becomes aware of some dire practical flaw in the master's reasoning, the forms of blindness or stupidity that result, the fact these oblige the slave to devote even more energy trying to understand and anticipate the master's confused perceptions—are we not, in however small a way, doing the same work as the whip? There is a reason why Elaine Scarry (1985: 28) called torture a form of "stupidity." It's not really about making its victims talk. Ultimately, it's about the very opposite.

There is another reason I began with that story. As my apparently inexplicable confusion over the signatures makes clear, such dead zones can, temporarily at least, render *anybody* stupid—in the same way, ultimately, as my position as a male academic could make it possible for me to write a first draft of this essay entirely oblivious to the fact that many of its arguments were simply reproducing commonplace feminist ideas. All of these forms of blindness ultimately stem from trying to navigate our way through situations made possible by structural violence. It will take enormous amount of work to begin to clear away these dead zones. But recognizing their existence is a necessary first step.

Acknowledgements

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[11] There has been of late a minor boomlet in anthropological studies of ignorance (e.g., Gershon and Raj 2000; Scott 2000; Dilley 2010; High, Kelly, and Mair 2012), and some of the more recent examples even take some of the arguments of my original Malinowski lecture into consideration. But even here, one can observe at least a slight tug pulling in the opposite direction, as when High, Kelly, and Mair suggest, in their introduction, that while a political critique approach to the subject is not invalid, a distinctively "ethnographic approach" must mean seeing ignorance not in purely negative terms, as the absence of knowledge, but "as a substantive phenomenon with its own history" and therefore to understand its "productivity" (2012: 15–16). This of course sounds very much like Foucault on power. Ethnography abhors a vacuum. But vacuums do exist.

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