

Bureaucratic Realism

What is the bureaucracy, that sphinx so tantalizing to the authoritarian mind?

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22 February 2025

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‘The bureaucracy is a circle from which no one can escape.’
(*Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Karl Marx)

‘The chains of tormented mankind are made out of red tape.’
(Franz Kafka, quoted in *Conversations With Kafka* by Gustav Janouch)

‘The more restrictions and prohibitions in the world,
the poorer people get.
[...] The louder the call for law and order,
the more the thieves and con men multiply.’
(*Tao Te Ching*, s. 57, Ursula K. Le Guin translation)

Tropes

With the movie *Monsters, Inc.* (2001), Pixar brought us to the fascinating world of the bureaucracy that runs the nightmares of monsters in closets. In *Inside Out* (2015), Pixar transports viewers to the inner world of a young woman, Riley, to meet the personified emotions—Joy, Sadness, and others—that run Riley’s emotions from their perky office in her mind. In a later film, we are again transported to a colorful Mexican afterlife in Pixar’s *Coco* (2017), and the first thing we see is immigration control and its supporting bureaucratic apparatuses. Again in *Soul* (2020), Pixar brings us to the pre-life and afterlife, where spirits all named Jerry hold office.

There seems to be a trend here: namely, that Pixar presents the office as a natural form of human (and superhuman and inhuman) activity—so natural that monsters in closets, emotions, afterlives, and pre-lives all conform to the bureaucratic-form.

This normalising phenomenon is by no means restricted to Pixar. In the Spanish serial *El ministerio del tiempo* (*The Ministry of Time*, 2015–2020), time itself is managed by the supernatural titular bureaucracy, whereby State power and sovereignty transcend even time itself. In serials both *The Good Place* (2016–2020) and *Miracle Worker* (2019–2023), heaven, hell, the answering of prayers, and even the domain of God are seen as perky comedic offices. While these shows may be comedic in nature, the supernatural bureaucracies presented in these shows present bureaucracy as natural, patterning the bureau onto heaven and hell, across time itself!

There are likely many many other recent examples, but it will suffice for our purposes to say that the trope of a supernatural bureaucracy speaks to how widespread and seemingly natural the bureaucratic-form is today.

Realism

If Mark Fisher suggests there exists a ‘capitalist realism,’ then perhaps we can also posit a ‘bureaucratic realism.’ If capitalist realism considers the capitalist status quo and capitalist social relations writ large as natural, or even inevitable, then just so, bureaucratic realism looks at the bureaucratic-form and (like Margaret Thatcher) says, ‘There Is No Alternative.’ Just as bureaucracy is a natural organizational-form for humanity, so must it be for supernatural beings (and vice versa).

If the popular imagination under capitalist realism finds that ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism,’ it is similarly the case that the bureaucratic realist imagination may imagine an end to the capitalist mode of production and capitalist social relations, but find an inability to imagine the end of the bureaucratic-form, the State, and statist social relations.

Not being merely an infection of public imagination, bureaucratic realism is an infection of the *revolutionary* imagination. Self-professed liberation movements—*especially* those professing to be Marxist—structure their forces into... *a bureaucracy*. This is essentially what the vanguard party-form is. A vanguard party really is just a bureaucracy whose goal is to capture and keep power.

Naturality

In *Capitalist Realism*, Mark Fisher discusses how media that critique capitalism substitutes itself for anti-capitalism itself. The patron character of ultraliberalism in the video game *Disco Elysium* (2019), Joyce Messier, summarizes Fisher quite eloquently: ‘Capital has the ability to subsume all critiques into itself. Even those who *critique* capital end up *reinforcing* it instead.’ [Emphasis in the original.]

In 2014, Emmett Rensin argued in *The New Republic* that ‘The Onion Has Become America’s Finest Marxist News Source,’ though tongue firmly in cheek. His point was that a critique of capitalism has been internalised in our culture, and that *The Onion* satirizes that internalisation. On some level, we all know the critiques of capitalism. Even champions of capitalism will admit this fact, often deflecting criticisms of capitalism onto notions like ‘crony capitalism,’ ‘the elite’ and other such flimsy excuses of theories. Yet as Fisher and Messier suggest, these critiques merely *reinforce* the dominion of capital.

Similarly, there is a wealth of mass media from Franz Kafka to *Parks and Recreations* (2009–2015) and *The Good Place* that suggests that we all similarly have internalized a critique of the bureaucracy. Mind-numbing bureaucracy is *hilarious* on screen! Despite the naturality of the bureaucratic-form, we know and understand why it is harmful, why it is joyless and mind-numbing, *yet it persists*. Just as critiques of capital are subsumed into the dominion of capital, so too are critiques of the bureaucratic-form subsumed into its dominion.

Indeed, there are Taoist schools close to anarchism that have been critiquing bureaucracy for more than 24 centuries. It is quite bizarre that despite literally thousands of years of critiques of bureaucracy from Taoism to anarchism, Franz Kafka, and *Parks and Recreations*, that bureaucracy continues to present itself as natural—even inevitable.

Bureaucracy does not merely present itself as the natural (or even supernatural) order of things; it is *desirable*. This is what leftism tells us through old-school German social-democracy, Bolshevism, Leninism, and Stalinism.

Agency

What is bureaucracy? Bureaucracy is the mediation of political agency through technocracy. Bureaucracy is the empowerment of a single homogeneous entity—the office. It is a concentration of initiative and agency into the office, and it is the top-down structure that we call bureaucratic.

Bureaucratic realism has within it a sort of intuition and a certain aesthetic that appeals to technocrats on the left and on the right. Lenin's aesthetic of an entire machine pushing forward through a single will is an embodiment of this aesthetic. The aesthetic of Stalin and Mao's rapid industrialisation at the cost of the proletarianisation and immiseration of peasants and Indigenous peoples are also part of bureaucratic realism. 'There is no alternative' to the bureaucracy, it tells us.

The intuition of bureaucratic realism is in the division of labour, where those that do the thinking can be separated from those that do the doing. In a bureaucracy, the decision-making mechanisms are concentrated in the centre. Agency, then, becomes a privilege within the bureaucracy. The aesthetic of bureaucratic realism is in unity, coordination, military discipline, and collective power wielded in a purified form.

In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott describes 'high modernism,' a sort of faith that bureaucrats have in science and technology that they believe they can use to reorder the natural and social world. High modernism is not merely a faith, but an *epistemology*—a specific theory of knowledge—by which high modernists use to reorder the world. As Scott suggests, the epistemic view of the high modernist is one that privileges the perspective of the bureaucrat looking down on a map, a map that has specifically simplified the world into only constituent information that can be used to govern. The high modernist then uses this simplified map of the world to then alter reality through its agency. 'Its hierarchy is a hierarchy of knowledge,' Karl Marx once noted, soberly prefiguring Micheal Foucault.

The bureaucracy, in this sense, is a faith in its own agency. And indeed, the bureaucratic-form has created wonders of the world, from the Pyramids of Giza to the United States of America to the Soviet Union. Yet, at what cost? Genocide, famine, and poverty litter the world, a consequence of the high-modernist faith in bureaucratic agency.

Politike

Bureaucratic realism, high modernism, and the Statist politics of mediation and representation are what Murray Bookchin described as *statecraft* as opposed to *politics*, or *politike* in the ancient Greek. For Bookchin, statecraft is the business of the State: how politicians, bureaucrats, and representatives manage and oversee social life. Meanwhile, politics is what people do in the exercise of collective power. Bookchin bases his conception of politics in the ancient Athenian *polis*, an ancient form of direct democracy where citizens took active part of social and political life in the self-management of their *polis*. Of course, Bookchin does not make ancient Athens a model (with all its slavery, misogyny, warmongering, imperialism, xenophobia, and paedophilia), but rather wanted to generalise its most desirable features: namely, politics as collective face-to-face decision-making in local assemblies.

Even if one disagrees with the polity-form that Bookchin champions, Bookchin's location of politics-as-*politike* in direct and immediate political life is an important contribution to a world beyond the rulership of the bureau. The bureau looks upon the world with its high-modernist lens to alter it into its grey image. As Scott suggests, high modernism and its resulting statecraft tends to banish politics, as the interests of those subjected to the bureaucracy are often at odds with the top-down management of the bureaucracy. In contrast to statecraft, politics as Bookchin

understood it allows individuals to relate to each other *as equals* and as part of an egalitarian collectivity.

Against the statecraft of bureaucratic realism, Bookchin advanced the community assembly and municipal self-management. Indeed, such forms of self-directed politics are the opposite of the bureaucratic-form. Rather than mediation through a technocracy, politics eschews such mediation. Instead of an empowerment of the office and the concentration of initiative and agency, it is the collective political agency of all in assembly. Instead of a division of labour between the command and the carrying-out, there is no division, though there may be mandates. 'Bureaucracy is a direct negation of mass self-activity,' as Alexandra Kollantai once noted.

Imagery

In Situationist theory, the Spectacle and spectacular images refer to how the real (or reality) is substituted by reified images of the false (or falsity). A Spectacular image presents itself as a real thing, but this is in fact just an image, a simulation, a Spectacle of what it presents itself as. In this sense, the bureaucratic-form presents itself as a Spectacular image of agency, while statecraft presents itself as a Spectacular image of politics. What this means is that the bureaucratic-form can indeed 'get shit done' through the mechanics of hierarchy, the image of efficiency, and (when applicable) the raw application of sovereign violence. But all of this Spectacular agency is done through divesting agency from the people. The agency of the bureaucracy substitutes itself as popular agency, and the statecraft of bureaucrats substitutes itself as popular politics.

Instead of self-activity, workers' councils, and soviets, there is the '*unquestioning obedience* to the will of a single person, the Soviet leader,' per Vladimir Lenin [italics in original]. Indeed, instead of less work, the regime of work was further imposed, and revolutionary gains were no longer measured in the liberation of the working class from proletarianisation, but in the image of improving the *conditions* of proletarianisation. Socialism as the abolition of class distinctions was no longer on the table, as a new Spectacular image of socialism was developed by the new revolutionary bureaucracy.

Of course, workers will make mistakes and suffer inefficiencies in the workplace and in revolution, so it may seem like centralisation and bureaucratic management could make sense, but as Rosa Luxemburg once concluded:

'Historically, the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee.'

Against the bureaucratic-realist images and aesthetics of righteous people's armies, waving red flags, and tightly planned economies, it becomes necessary to throw down these images and aesthetics in favor of a real movement to abolish the current state of things.

Proceduralism

A key aspect of bureaucratic realism is the reification and resulting 'realism' of the procedure. Once the bureaucracy produces the procedure, all aspects of life become subordinated to its proceduralism. Procedure becomes an end-in-of-itself. Procedure becomes domination through

its one-size-fits-all mentality—a copy-paste principle wherein the rich diversity of social life is simplified and then judged based on its simplification. When the bureaucracy is faced with a problem, it tries desperately (and often in vain) to solve it through the procedure. In this sense, procedure becomes monolithic in aim: all things become subjected to the simplifying power of the procedure.

The tyranny of the procedure is clearest in the politics of harm and carcerality. When harm is done, we are encouraged to report to the police or to a lawyer who then responds to this harm in a procedural way. ‘Procedurals’ are also a genre of media in which we see a dramatization of the legalist procedure in a way that presents the procedure as natural, as *the correct* response. Within the proceduralism of law, harm is categorized and reduced to the basis of mere facts. In *Les Misérables* (1862), a boy, Jean Valjean, steals a loaf of bread and spends 19 years imprisoned and enslaved to repent for it. His crime of theft is simplified in terms of the harm he has committed to private property. Procedure demands he be convicted and enslaved, as the vast complexity of poverty and social life evaporate before the iron fist of the law.

In this sense, the critique of bureaucracy necessarily becomes at the same time an abolitionist critique of carcerality. Carceral procedures do in fact reify the procedures above all else and dominate social life. Policing and imprisonment become the one-size-fits-all strategy towards which all aspects of social life become subordinated to. Poverty causes one to steal out of desperation, and thieves are met with the prison cell. Hunger causes one to seek out the numbing effects of drugs, and users are met with prison cells. Poverty and hunger disappear in the procedure of law, and only the crime and the prison cell remains.

Carceral procedures become an end-of-itself, becoming a one-size-fits all strategy for the bureaucracy to manage social life. Racialised social life creates a surplus population of workers who cannot be integrated into a racist system of valorisation. Proceduralism then applies carceral procedures as the go-to response. Thus, the prison becomes the site of management of surplus populations. After emancipation, the formerly enslaved can no longer be coerced to work? Put them in prison. People immigrating to the country become undesirables by virtue of racialisation? Put them in prison. The New Left and other undesirables disproportionately use marijuana? Criminalise it and put them in prison.

Less obviously, the tyranny of proceduralism is also present in elections. ‘Don’t like how things are? Vote better, or even better, run for office yourself.’ The catalyst and agency for change then become reified in electoral proceduralism. The desire for social change becomes a competitive platform of policy positions. Social life, then, is judged in terms of this simplification. The world of politics-as-*politike* is reduced. There are no discussions: only the vote, only the statecraft, *only the procedure*. There is only the mediation and domination of social life by the procedure. This is how social life is reduced to monoliths of the far-right versus the centre-right—through procedure. Bureaucratic realism in this sense presents its procedure as the whole of reality, as the totalising image of political life. All life must pass through bureaucratic procedure for it to matter.

Against the tyranny of carceral proceduralism, transformative justice, for example, envisions specific and targeted ways by which harm can be addressed. These alternative ways of addressing harm forgo totalising procedures and address harm in the way that those harmed seek it, specific to each circumstance. Whereas carcerality often only results in the prison cell, perhaps alternative results seek restitution and reparation. There is no one way or one-size-fits-all to dealing and managing with harm. In the same way, against the tyranny of electoral proceduralism, politics

outside the electoral sphere can deal with political issues that the bureaucratic system is unable to address. Such is the case when it comes to Israel and the genocide in Gaza, Palestine, and Lebanon—solutions cannot be found within the very totalising system that reduces politics to programs, and then reduces it further into ballots.

Permanentization

In the Philippines, there is a curious government body called the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity (OPAPRU, formerly Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process or OPAPP). OPAPRU is the office that oversees the various peace tables in the country such as those that concern the Maoist and Moro insurgencies.

The thrash metal band Megadeth asks in their 1986 hit song ‘Peace Sells... but Who’s Buying?’ the question: ‘Can you put a price on peace?’ OPAPRU seems to instead ask: ‘can you bureaucratise peace?’ OPAPRU is essentially a bureaucracy that oversees the peace process. Bureaucratic realism structures this logic in that the bureaucratic-form is seemingly so natural that Filipinos even structure their peace processes as a bureaucracy.

However, by bureaucratising peace, OPAPRU reproduces the alienation and technocracy associated with bureaucracy. The office talks a lot about an ‘inclusive peace,’ but peace is built by people themselves (*politike/politics*) and cannot be mandated or constructed by any office or revolutionary group (*statecraft*). How can peace be inclusive or owned by the communities affected if it is imposed top-down by the state and rebel para-state entities?

The result is that the Philippines remains unable to break the cycles of violence that grips the country. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) first starts its liberation war, then wins negotiated concessions from the Philippine State. This peace was implemented top-down by both the MNLF and the government and resulted in another rebellion by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Now the MILF has its own negotiated concession from the State, but the top-down nature of peace resulted in new rebel groups continuing the fight, including the feared *Daesh* (so-called ‘Islamic State’) through its Maute group. The same can be said for the old communist party (PKP-1930) and the new Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The PKP-1930 sold out to the dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and the CPP broke with the old Party, only to sell out to dynastic politicians in turn like Manny Villar and Rodrigo Duterte.

OPAPRU is by no means an outlier. The Philippines is also the only country in the world with a permanent Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR). Within modernisation theory, States carry out agrarian reform within a decade or so to modernise rural property relations and set the stage for subsequent forms of capitalist development. But the Philippines has turned a temporary reform into a permanent mechanism, constantly captured by landlord interests that traps what is otherwise a simple transfer of property into a Byzantine and inscrutable process.

Like DAR, there are also some in OPAPRU that call for their office to be a full department in the Philippine State: an *ad hoc* measure transformed into a permanent never-ending proceduralism. This desire, like that of permanentizing agrarian reform, speaks of a bureaucratic-realist logic of self-justifying management in perpetuity, of reifying procedure. ‘As far as the individual bureaucrat is concerned, the end of the state becomes his private end: a pursuit of higher posts, the building of a career,’ as Marx once noted. This is the same desire that transformed the early Bolshevik government from temporary management until the governance of cooks and

the vast majority became possible (i.e. Lenin's 'every cook can govern') to a permanent regime of cadres and the rule of the bureaucracy. The procedure of the State, once a temporary measure in communist theory, becomes a permanent procedure in communist practice.

In this sense, the bureaucratic-form has its own collective interests that justifies permanentization, transforming transient tasks to permanent rulership, thereby transforming its purpose into its own self-perpetuation. 'According to the cybernetician, the purpose of a system is what it does.' OPAPRU does not build peace (much less a lasting one), but manages long-term low-intensity conflict. DAR does not provide land to the landless but prevents land reform. The Bolshevik government did not build a popular self-government where every cook can govern but instead, the dictatorship of the party. Indeed, as Alexandra Kollantai once noted about the Bolshevik government in 1921: 'The task is clear: it is to arouse initiative and self-activity in the masses. But what is being done to encourage and develop that initiative? Nothing at all.'

Technology

Bureaucracy is a specific and contingent technology of power. It developed under specific contingent conditions and would fall apart under different contingencies. As a technology of power, bureaucracy makes certain achievements possible. In the ancient world, bureaucracy made possible the pyramids of Egypt and vast imperial armies. In the modern world, bureaucracy makes possible world-wide extractivism and nuclear energy. The massive concentration of power, agency, and capacity that allows States and their bureaucracies to carry out their will is precisely a result of the technologies of power that the bureau provides.

A bandit makes permanent the procedure of tribute. In order to do so, the bandit-king creates the technology of proceduralism and permanentization, thereby no longer becoming a bandit, but a legitimate king in fact. In order to defend this permanentization, the king must develop the army (an armed bureaucracy) to force tribute and the (civil) bureaucracy to manage tribute. In order to defend his legitimacy, the king uses a small part of the tribute to manage society from above. This is the State, or as Peter Kropotkin noted in 1896, an 'existence of a power situated above society, [and] a *territorial concentration* as well as the concentration *in the hands of a few of many functions in the life of societies*' [italics in original].

However, the technologies of States and bureaucratic-forms are only a small part of the vast diversity of social-technological forms that human society has developed. New work in archaeology by comparative archaeologists like David Wengrow suggests vast populations, even urban populations, lived without kings or elites. New archaeological evidence also suggests that ancient urban people in one site in China cooperated to develop a hydraulic system in spite of no evidence of an elite to coordinate its construction. Contrary to previous scholarship, the classical Maya civilization did not collapse. Rather, what did collapse was urban elite rule and their state apparatuses. The Maya countryside continued to preserve Maya culture and civilization long after the collapse of Maya states without a significant break in demographics. What all of this suggests is that the technologies of the State can be wholly superfluous in the self-management of society.

As Kropotkin astutely more than a century prior, the many functions in the life of society need not be concentrated in the hands of a few. The configuration of the State and the bureaucratic-form are historically contingent. The Roman Empire and many of its successor States have risen

and fallen. Chinese dynasties rise, stagnate, and fall. Even our current global capitalist civilisation has already passed its best-by date due to the climate crisis. If specific historical contingencies can give rise to certain social-technological configurations, a different set of historical contingencies could give rise to a different set of configurations, making possible anarchy and communism.

The bureaucratic-form, through both its governmental and corporate manifestations, is leading the world to climate ruin, but despite its proceduralism, despite its permanence, *it can be undone* as the specific forms of historical contingency that gave rise to these bureaucracies are themselves being undone in this current era of class conflict. If empires have fallen before, the world empire of the bureaucratic-form can fall, too.

Alienation

In a brief critique of anarchism Slavoj Žižek made in an interview, he called for ‘nice alienation’ with regards to the ability of State bureaucracy to provide the basic necessities of life. To quote at length:

‘First, are you aware that [...] in order for this [society] to function, you need a good efficient State to organize a complex background. Like, okay, you organized the distribution of electricity — *fuck you*, where does electricity come from? It has to be rendered available. Education, health care and so on and so on.

So again, the second point: [...] that our ultimate goal should be not [the] representative state but “living local democracy” where people are immediately present and self-organizing and so on and so on. Now I will [give] you a very brutal argument but it was made once by Trotsky in a very intelligent way. Namely, to be brutal: Would you really like to live in a shitty local democracy situation? Every afternoon you have to go to some stupid meeting, how to organize [the] education of children, how we distribute water, how we do this, that.

No, sorry! I want to live in a *nicely alienated state*, by nicely alienated I mean that it’s invisible there out of your control but it *delivers*, it *functions*. Water is *here*. I don’t want to debate every afternoon where water comes from and how. I want water to be *here*. I want healthcare to be *here*. I want energy to be *here*. [Own transcription.]’

He then continues to a third point, namely that social problems today have become transnational issues that State power on a national level is incapable of solving, and that ‘larger global organisms’ are needed to manage and regulate corporations and global ecological crises at a transnational scale.

What is curious about Žižek’s critique is that it presumes alienation and statecraft are not only necessary, but *desirable*. We can interpret Žižek here as arguing *in favor* of the necessity of bureaucracy, and by extension, the desirability of bureaucratic realism. In his perspective, only the bureaucracy writ large on a global scale could solve the polycrisis we face today.

But the polycrisis we face is one precisely *caused by* the hubris of high modernism and bureaucratic realism. The fact of the matter is that we are experiencing the worst of both worlds: We

have both alienation *and* poor provision of social needs, as evidenced by global crises in energy, education, water, and climate. Furthermore, the State, transnational State organisations, international multilateral organizations, and multinational corporations have all proved incapable of even *minimum* cooperation for the climate crisis, as the world sleepwalks into disaster. If the State and its bureaucracies prove incapable of dealing with crises *right now*, what makes those who believe in the ability of the State to resolve contradictions in class society think the State can deal adequately with the polycrisis facing us today?

While ‘nice alienation’ might be appealing in the sense that people do not really care where electricity and water comes from, where the trash goes, et cetera, as long as it happens, what is curious is that this ‘nice alienation’ is what precisely brought us to the current ecological and climate crisis. People are simplified and rendered as mere consumers. As consumers, they are alienated from the means of electric generation, and all the consumers care about is that the commodity is cheap—hence, the proliferation of coal-fired power. Alienated from their supply of water, consumers do not care whose homelands the water reservoirs flood. They do not care where the garbage is dumped. They do not care about the suffering it takes to bring food on the table.

Historically speaking, many of the social functions of the State (like welfare and health) were not the domain of the State, but of mutual aid associations, i.e. functions of politics rather than statecraft. This is indeed the argument put forward in ‘Neither State Nor Market’ by Steve Millett, that society had to be divested of its social functions and usurped by the State in order to ensure its domination over society. As mentioned, archaeology has dug up evidence of a communal drainage system from a city with no elite apparatus even as far back as ancient China. Indeed, recent anthropological-archaeological work suggests that throughout history, stateless urban and various other kinds of social forms have created societies without elite apparatuses, while still managing the social reproduction of their societies.

Indeed, all across the medieval and early modern world, informal and civil associations of the working classes managed the commons and provided social services *in spite of* and *despite*, not because of, the State. As Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker argued in *The Many-Headed Hydra*, the working classes had to be progressively terrorised into domination, alienated and divested of their commons and organizations. This regime of terror allowed the bureaucracy to reduce the working class to dependency on their sovereign. A similar argument could be made about the high-modernist project of the Soviet Union: namely, that the Soviet government thoroughly terrorised and eliminated civil society in order to engender dependence on the Soviet welfare State. Taking again from *The Many-Headed Hydra*, the ‘living local democracy’ that Žižek disparaged is not some future ideal, but *was a living social reality* for much of the world until the rule of capital and the State destroyed it with terror and the rule of law. Ironically even, Žižek matured in a period of Yugoslav history that consciously moved away from a high level of bureaucratic management towards a certain level of self-management that was able to provide social needs more responsive than Soviet and Western counterparts, despite the usual problems with State socialist isolation.

‘Nice alienation,’ then, is a demand for counterrevolution. Did not Mussolini achieve getting the trains to run on time? No, he didn’t, but the myth of ‘nice alienation’ under Mussolini did work wonders for the popularity of the fascist bureaucracy and of spectacular statecraft. ‘Nice alienation’ is merely the Spectacular image of ‘getting shit done.’ Indeed, ‘nice alienation’ has *always* been the myth surrounding the bureaucratic-form. The desire for ‘nice alienation’ and

deference of social functions to great leaders and their bureaucracies cannot be the solution to the polycrisis facing us today.

Resistance

Bureaucratic realism presents the bureaucracy as a natural and desirable form of human organization. While able to see and desire a world without the capitalist mode of production, leftism remains unable to seriously see an alternative to the bureaucratic form.

But bureaucracy is not natural! Bureaucracy is an alienating force imposed by states or para-state entities (e.g. parties). Against the notion that bureaucracies are natural or even desirable, anti-bureaucratic forms of organization have rebelled against the mediated form of politics that bureaucracy imposes upon life. Soviet democracy, council communism, direct democracy, and anarchist federalism have all presented organisational forms that strike against bureaucracy.

Ursula K. Le Guin famously said at her National Books Award speech: 'We live in capitalism; its power seems inescapable—but so did the divine right of kings. Any human power can be changed by human beings.' Bureaucracy is ultimately a human invention. Bureaucracy and the State have only been present in human history for a fraction of our species' history, much less the history of life and the universe. As a human invention, bureaucracy can also be resisted and changed. We can envision better worlds.

Bureaucratic realism must be resisted as much as we resist capitalism itself. Bureaucratic realism is a failure of revolutionary imagination. Just so, the vanguard party form reproduces the bureau form into its structure because those within the party cannot imagine life organised differently. The bureaucracy does not deepen our freedoms.

A revolution is a celebration of the possible, a celebration of what could be, of empowerment, and of visionary practice. We cannot limit the heterogeneity of visions and initiatives to a top-down bureaucratic structure *again!* A true social revolution is heterogeneous and is characterized by a plurality of visions and initiatives and a diversity of ideas and practice. What comes to mind is the unironic adoption of the Maoist adage 'Let a Thousand Flowers Bloom.'

Realists

From the trope of the supernatural bureaucracy to the organisational form for a revolutionary organisation, the bureaucratic-form is primarily a failure of the imagination. Despite the infinite possibilities of the supernatural and of creative ways of organization some can only imagine an *office!* This is the absurdity of the human experience under bureaucratic realism today. Le Guin's National Book Award speech continued: 'Resistance and change often begin in art. Very often in our art, the art of words.' As she said:

'Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom—poets, visionaries—realists of a larger reality.'

The solution to the constraints on the mind placed upon us by bureaucratic realism is the support of alternative fiction, ‘realists of a larger reality.’ Walidah Imarisha calls this ‘visionary fiction,’ or visions of alternate ways to organize society. Visionary fiction offers us a vision of organising society without bureaucracy.

The reemergence of bureaucracy under anarcho-communism in Le Guin’s *The Dispossessed* is a parable on the pervasiveness of bureaucratic realism even among a completely anarchist world. The Production-Distribution-Coordination (PDC) was the de facto government of Anarres. The character Shevek described the PDC as having become an anarchist bureaucracy or even as ‘archist’ (the in-world stand-in for Stalinism and the opposite of anarchist). Shevek and his allies attempt to re-revolutionise Anarres through the Syndicate of Initiative that shakes up the bureaucratic PDC. In the end (and beginning), Shevek leaves Anarres for Urras (a capitalist planet) in order to find a way to benefit both societies and at the same time reaffirm his commitment to revitalising Anarres.

In this sense, *The Dispossessed* is part of Le Guin’s resistance to the bureaucratic-form. She shows how it can emerge even under anarchist conditions and how she thinks it can be overcome through creative organising.

There will be no easy answers or sure-fire fixes to the polycrisis we face or the calamity of bureaucratic realism, but the alternative necessarily begins in the imagination. Just as capitalist realism challenges us to imagine and fight for an alternative, so too must we be challenged by bureaucratic realism to imagine and fight for alternatives to the bureaucratic-form.

In *Bullshit Jobs*, David Graeber asks: ‘Every day we wake up and collectively make a world together; but which one of us, left to our own devices, would ever decide they wanted to make a world like this one?’ A world beyond the bureaucracy exists if we are brave enough to see it and build it.

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