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Beyond Power/Knowledge

An Exploration of power, ignorance and stupidity

David Graeber

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25th May 2006

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ing, 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.

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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 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 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.”

rial 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.

Historical research reveals that the inhabitants of Muot Dit were, in fact, largely former followers 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). 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 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 really wanted, 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 own 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 undo-

tween 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. 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. 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. The panopticon was a prison. Prisoners endured the gaze, and internalized its dictates, because if they tried to escape, or resist, they could be killed. 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 impe-

She said she’d check with the manager, and after ten minutes returned, saying 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?” asked the manager, who was listening in. “Who gave you those forms and didn’t tell you about the letter?”

Since the apparent culprit was actually one of the nicer bank employees, I changed the subject, noting 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 consequences of some anonymous clerk in the New York Department of Motor Vehicles who decided my given name was

“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 the defining feature of a utopian form of practice, in that, on discovering this, those maintaining the system conclude that the problem is not with the system itself but with the inadequacy of the human beings involved.

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”? This despite the fact that I had been investing a great deal of mental and emotional energy in the whole affair. The problem, I think, 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 what was required was the correct interpretation of one or two Latin words, and correct performance of 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 ritual 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, not 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 14-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

Actually, I suspect 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 almost half a century ago (1959). Nowadays structural analysis is considered definitively passé; Claude Levi-Strauss’ theoretical corpus, vaguely ridiculous. It seems to me this is unfortunate. The great merit of structural analysis is that it provides an well-nigh foolproof technique for doing what any good theory should do: simplifying and schematizing complex material in such a way as to be able to say something unexpected. This is incidentally how I actually came up with the point about Weber just above:

I prefer to see someone like Levi-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 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 famous definition of mature intelligence as the ability to coordinate be-

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, it seems to me, 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 pre-existing 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 2% of what's in front of them. Admittedly, something very similar happens in social theory. An ethnographic description, even a very good one, captures at best 2% 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 tissue of human circumstance, and using it as the basis on which to make generalizations: say, about the nature of social conflict or about the nature of performance. I am certainly not trying to say there's anything wrong in this kind of theoretical reduction (I'm arguably doing it right now).

syndrome. Without those forms, my mother would not be, legally—socially—dead.

Why, then, are there not vast ethnographic tomes about American or British rites of passage, with long chapters about forms and paperwork? The obvious answer is that paperwork is boring. There really aren't 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 unpack complex webs of meaning or signification: intricate ritual symbolism, social dramas, poetic forms, 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's intention was to exhaust every meaning, motives, or association packed in to a single Nwala ritual, Balinese cockfight, witchcraft accusation, or family saga, one could potentially go on forever: all the more so if one also wished to trace its relations with other elements in the larger social or symbolic fields they invariably open up. Forms in contrast are designed to be maximally simple and self-contained. There just isn't much there to interpret. Literature, of course, has the same problem with bureaucracy. At best it can become the object of some kind of bleak Kafkaesque comedy. But even here there, it's probably significant that Kafka has remained pretty much the only author to have made great literature of any sort out of bureaucracy: there's so little there that once you've done it, there's nothing left for anyone to add.

Still, social theory abhors a vacuum. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the literature on bureaucracy itself. Insofar as ethnographies of bureaucracy exist—the paradigm here is Herzfeld's "The Social Production of Indifference" (1992)—the "bureaucracy as idiom" perspective tends to be represented at best as the naïve folk model whose existence any sophisticated, cultural understanding of the phenomenon must start by being able to explain. This is not to say such works necessarily deny that immersion in bureaucratic codes and regulations does, in fact, regularly 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 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 important.

When we pass to the more rarified domains of theory, even that “yes, but” usually disappears. Consider the hegemonic role, in US social theory, of Max Weber in the ‘50s and ‘60s, and of Michel Foucault ever since. 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’s no coincidence that these sometimes appear to be the only two intelligent people in human history who honestly believed that bureaucracies work. Weber saw bureaucratic forms of organization as the very embodiment of rationality, so obviously superior to any alternative that they threatened to lock humanity in a joyless “iron cage”, bereft of spirit and charisma. Foucault was far more subversive, but in a way that made bureaucratic power more effective, not less.

Bodies, subjects, truth itself, all become the products of administrative discourses; through concepts like governmentality and biopower, state bureaucracies end up shaping the terms of human existence in ways far more intimate than anything Weber would have possibly 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. The current ascendancy of Foucault seems trace back to ‘60s radicals’ rejection of Talcott Parson’s version of Weber for precisely this reason; the ultimate result however was a kind of division of labor, with the optimistic side of Weber

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 actually 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.

IV

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 officers, whose real role, as police sociologists have repeatedly demonstrated, 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

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. Half of the boys usually 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.

There are two critical elements here that, while linked, should probably 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 that of sympathetic identification. Interestingly, it was Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (XXX), 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

reinvented in even more simplified form for the actual training of bureaucrats under the name of “rational choice theory”, while of the 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, but that were themselves most completely divorced from any access to political power, or increasingly, even to real social movements—which 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 historical argument is a bit caricaturish and unfair; but 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 and what’s important, 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 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.

II

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 have been summoned to physically remove them. It’s almost as 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 violence.

In many of the rural communities that 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 inspir-

lar 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) always 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.

Patriarchal families of this sort are, as generations of feminists have emphasized, most certainly forms of structural violence; their norms are indeed sanctioned by 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—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, involving an 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

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, their aversions and proclivities, and so forth. Hit them over the head hard enough, 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, they are predictable. 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 understandings, these can be pretty minimal. It's important to bear in mind that 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 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 interpretive labor—becomes most salient when the violence itself is least visible, in fact, where acts of specu-

ing 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 insuring 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 19th and early 20th 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, which they were least inclined to tell them.

What's more, one result of the colonial experience was that what 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 19th 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 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 8AM.” 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, ultimately, consent, was not really required, since they were ultimately premised on the threat of violence.

In Madagascar, bureaucratic power was somewhat redeemed in most people’s minds by its tie to education. 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, for example, has documented at some length the regimes of “power without knowledge” typical of colonial South Africa (2003), where coercion and paperwork largely substituted for the need for understanding African subjects. The actual installation of apartheid beginning 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” (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.

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 put it (1965, 1971) between coercion and information: that is, while relatively democratic regimes tend to be awash in too much information, 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.

III

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 anthropological literature on the subject. The latter has tended instead to emphasize the ways that acts of violence are meaningful and communicative. It seems to me this is an area where we are particularly prone to fall victim to the confusion of interpretive depth and social significance: that is, to assume that the most interesting aspect of violence is also the most important. This is not to say that acts of violence are not, generally speaking, also acts of communication. Clearly they are. 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 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