**Towards a Bureaucracy of the Body**

**I**

**The Invention of Strange Writing**

In her *The Bureaucratization of the World* Beatrice Hibou[[1]](#endnote-1) explains the emergence of a global dystopia of hyper-rational bureaucracy comprising discipline, control, and indifference, but never fully unpacks what we might call the cultural history of western bureaucratic writing to show how a form of communication meant to humanise and civilise the world has ended up producing a miserable symbolic system unable to recognise the value of human life or the limits of the biosphere. Perhaps consideration of the long cultural history of thinking about bureaucracy, taking in the key theorists of this strange form of writing that no longer recognises the value of its human masters, will enable a greater understanding of the process of estrangement that led to the reversal of the ideal of rational civilization towards the contemporary dystopian form Hibou explores in her work and on the basis of this offer some suggestion about potential escape routes from the bureaucratization of the world that catches humanity like a rat in a maze of its own making. But where to begin? Let me start with Plato’s *Phaedrus[[2]](#endnote-2)* and specifically the myth of Thamous and Theuth, which sees Socrates tell the story of the king of Egypt, the God of writing, and the gift of memory recall that the king suspects will actually lead to a new world of forgetfulness, abstraction, and pretentious language games:

Theuth came to Thamous and showed him the branches of expertise he had invented, and suggested that they should be spread throughout Egypt…It would take a long time to go through all of Thamous’ views, but when it was the turn of writing, Theuth said, ‘Your highness, this science will increase the intelligence of the people of Egypt and improve their memories. For this invention is a potion for memory and intelligence.’ But Thamous replied, ‘You are most ingenious, Theuth. But one person has the ability to bring branches of expertise into existence, another to assess the extent to which they will harm or benefit those who use them. The loyalty you feel to writing, as its originator, has just led you to tell me the opposite of its true effect. It will atrophy people’s memories. Trust in writing will make them remember things by relying on marks made by others, from outside themselves, not on their own inner resources, and so writing will make things they have learnt disappear from their minds…You provide your students with the appearance of intelligence, not real intelligence. Because your students will be widely read, though without any contact with a teacher, they will seem to be men of wide knowledge, when they will usually be ignorant. And this spurious appearance of intelligence will make them difficult company.’[[3]](#endnote-3)

As the dialogue develops we see that Plato has Socrates recount the myth of the origins of writing to explain to his student Phaedrus the superiority of living speech to the shadowy technology of the written word. Socrates explains that writing is employed by poets, orators, and legislators who cannot defend themselves in spoken arguments because they lack the wisdom of the true philosopher who comes to embody the pursuit of the truth. While the philosopher is the search for wisdom incarnate, Socrates carefully leads Phaedrus towards the conclusion that poets, orators, and legislators compose verse, speeches, and laws on the basis of a technical command of words marked by a relationship of distance, alienation, and estrangement. There is no life, soul, or intimacy about their use of language which they operate by remote control. They are the children of Theuth’s bastard invention living and working in a space of shadows. According to Socrates, they appear to know their stuff, but when they are subject to rigorous examination it soon becomes clear that they have no idea what they are talking about.

Now it is precisely this critique of the estrangement of writing from living speech that Derrida takes up in his *Dissemination[[4]](#endnote-4)*, where he seeks to undermine Plato’s utopian fantasy of absolute presence and complete absence. Although Derrida does not completely dispute Socrates’ critique of writing, he thinks his view is one-sided and fails to recognise that Theuth’s potion is simultaneously a cure and a poison (the Greek word is pharmakon), which will produce both increased intelligence and ever more forgetfulness. While Plato’s Socrates opposes living speech to the cold cadaver of writing, Derrida explains that there is no real philosophical basis for the critique of the alienation of the presence of speech in the absence of writing because difference is essential. From this point of view the truth resides in the pharmacological technology of the written word which reflects the endless oscillation of presence, absence, presence into a future where meaning is always somewhere on the horizon. In other words, there is nothing before the separation of presence from itself in absence, difference, and ontological estrangement. In Derrida’s view speech is always already alienation from the body, which is itself a technical object marked by difference. In other words, we (humans) have always used tools of one kind or another, which is precisely what makes us what we are - human.

Written in the context of the late 1960s opposition to authoritarian father figures of all shapes and sizes, Derrida’s theory that there never was, and never could be, a point of absolute presence, a utopian moment before or after the fall, served to criticise political thinking based upon the idea that it might be possible to rediscover some lost ideal in a future paradise. In this way Derrida’s critique of self-identical presence opposed the idealism of the totalitarian state that Karl Popper[[5]](#endnote-5) thought was founded upon Platonic utopianism in the name of a vision of self-separation and a form of politics that emphasised the off-centre, incompletion, and writing that never ends. We find the same critique of self-identity in Derrida’s[[6]](#endnote-6) later reading of Heidegger’s hand, where he opposes the idea of the presence of hand-writing by emphasising the essential technicity of the human who has always worked with machines, but what this interpretation fails to take into account is what happens when the technical co-production of the human who manipulates symbols in order to make sense breaks down in the face of the emergence of a kind of technological writing that no longer responds to its old master. Although Heidegger[[7]](#endnote-7) clearly predicted this dark future in his critique of technology, Derrida’s turn towards American cybernetics and the idea of programmatic language in *Of Grammatology[[8]](#endnote-8)* meant that he never understood the potential problem of what his student Bernard Stiegler[[9]](#endnote-9) calls symbolic misery or saw the nightmare of hyper-rational writing that seems completely strange to the embodied reality of human life coming down the line.

In the contemporary (un)world of hyper-rational, cybernetic, computational and, I want to suggest, bureaucratic writing that no longer communicates with humanity on the level of its basic being in the world, Derrida’s problem of Platonic presence is reversed. That is to say that the issue is now no longer one concerned with the need to critique the fantasy of absolute presence, where the human is somehow self-contained and has no need for writing or other technologies, but rather about finding some way to respond to the absolute absence or estrangement of humanity from its own technical systems, which are now in the process of reducing the human being that exists in the space somewhere between God, who is completely free of nature, and the animal, that cannot escape from its environment, towards a state of automatic post- / pre-humanity where we become effects of a kind of global writing / calculating machine. The post-Derridean problem of hyper-rational writing is, therefore, about reversing the flow of the original pharmakon, which was about the critique of presence and self-identity, and finding some way to oppose the absence and estrangement of the human from its own technical (writing) system, which in Hibou’s[[10]](#endnote-10) work takes the form of a kind of global bureaucracy that towers over people treating them like so much data subject to miserable cost-benefit calculations. Against this vision of a utopia-dystopia of hyper-rational bureaucratic writing that makes perfect logical sense but no longer responds to the organic being of the human, my primary aim in this article is to explore the modern history of thinking about bureaucratic rationality. The purpose of this exercise is to show how the history of bureaucracy leads to the emergence of a situation that reverses Derrida’s original problem of Platonic writing (living speech versus the supplement of writing). Here, hyper-rational bureaucracy ends up subjecting the reason of the body to a new law characterised by the rule of a kind of strange or *estranged* writing (the word *bureaucracy* means rule of writing) and the endless circulation of signs that never ends. In response to this situation my second aim in the article is to try to identify the possibility of a pharmacological shift towards a different kind of bureaucracy (we might say neg-anthro-bureau-cracy) based upon a different kind of writing scaled and in proportion to the limitations of the human body that we might find within the thought of the key thinkers on the issue of modern bureaucratic estrangement: Weber, Kafka, Arendt, and Foucault. It is to these writers that I now propose to turn, taking the Germans (Kafka was Czech, but wrote in German) first, before concluding through a discussion of Foucault and finally Derrida’s student Stiegler, who similarly seeks to reverse his teacher’s pharmakon of writing towards a new kind of (human) cultural system - what I am calling a bureaucracy of the body.

**II**

**The Idea of Bureaucracy in Weber, Kafka, and Arendt**

Notwithstanding Plato’s[[11]](#endnote-11) Socratic critique of Theuth’s present of writing, which we might think about in terms of the origin story of writing taking flight into abstraction, Martin Albrow[[12]](#endnote-12) explains that modern bureaucracy was the invention of 18th French society. According to Albrow the term itself was coined by the economist Jacques Claude de Gournay who bemoaned ‘the rule of the writing table’ (bureau-cracy) and the banality of authority in modern France. For Ben Kafka[[13]](#endnote-13) this was always the problem of what he says became the fourth form of government – following Aristotle’s theory of the one (monarchy / tyranny), the few (aristocracy / oligarchy, and the many (polity / democracy) – in the sense that the rule of nobody or the rule of writing could never inspire a true connection with the people. There is no charisma in bureaucracy, but rather the opposite – a profound sense of disconnection. Given the very real problem of legitimate authority in a Godless world, however, Kafka[[14]](#endnote-14) points out that the most serious problem facing bureaucracy in modern France became about balancing the demands of surveillance and acceleration. Since the state was now required to stand in for the omnipotence of God who was on His way out, the problem of bureaucracy was how to see everything, but at the same time keep business ticking over. If the balance tipped too far in the direction of surveillance, stagnation and stasis would take over and the bureaucratic state would quickly turn into a kind of fossil or relic. Who needs antique writing in a modern world?

However, the opposite problem was little better. Under conditions where everything became about speed of processing, and what Cornelia Vismann[[15]](#endnote-15) calls, following the work of Paul Virilio, ‘a dromology of files’, all sense of detail would be lost in the blur of the mobilisation of writing. In other words, quality would be lost and good government would break down before the modern need for speed. Although Kafka tells us that the French erred on the side of acceleration and simply started to try to collect and process writing / data more quickly, we know that the general problem of the balance between attention to detail and speed of processing remains the (ontic) problem of bureaucracy today. Regardless of the new technologies that institutions and, in the neoliberal era of human capital, individuals use to try to operate bureaucracy more effectively, the threat of stasis and immobility is ever present. Even in the post-modern period, where paperwork has fallen out of favour before the techno-utopian ideal of the paperless office, the endless circulation of email means that it remains impossible to keep up. We never fail to complain about the speed of bureaucratic machine writing but, following the work of Vismann, it is possible to make the case that the whole point of the universe of files is to create an ontology of endless segmentation that relentlessly defers the problem of authority. From this point of view the entire point of modern bureaucratic writing is to obscure the problem of Platonic absence in the creation of the vision of a remote figure of authority to whom we want to address our complaints. The very act of complaining suggests that we believe there is somebody present, somebody out there who will listen to us.

For Vismann[[16]](#endnote-16), this is precisely the problem that Franz Kafka confronts over and over in his works - Who is in authority? Where is authority? – without ever working out a satisfactory answer. Of course, in the Godless world of the moderns, where transcendental authority is nowhere to be found, deferral is an essential technology of government because the ability to push the question (who makes the law?) endlessly down the line prevents one from ever having to confront the void (absence) that sits right at the heart of logos. There is no authority. There is no presence. There is only absence. However, there is a fundamental tension at work in this Derridean strategy of deferral, that we might argue represents the essence (or ontology) of the modern problem of bureaucratic authority, which is that deferral and delay must take place within the context of mobilisation, movement, and endless change. We must make progress and appear to move forward, while at the same time pushing problems into the distance, because complete stagnation and immobility will destroy the illusion at the centre of the bureaucratic system. Inertia will reveal the horror of absence.

The risk of complete stagnation, stasis, and immobility is that Kafka’s endless questioning might reveal that there is nobody there to answer, that bureaucratic power rests upon a fiction, and that resistance requires little more than withdrawal, which is what Paul North[[17]](#endnote-17) suggests Kafka concluded in his *Zurau Aphorisms[[18]](#endnote-18)*. Now it is precisely under these conditions, when strange writing stops, when bureaucracy grinds to a halt, that it becomes possible to restate the questions that Kafka asks over and over again in his work. Why is the law, why is bureaucracy, endlessly resistant to human need? Why can we never get what we want from this kind of government? Why are we tortured by this form of strange writing that seems to come from nowhere? Is it because, as Lacanian psychoanalysis would suggest, there is no way to respond to our demand, since what we want is lost to prehistory (there never was a moment of utopian presence before Oedipus) and will never return, in which case the problem sits with the person who stands before the law waiting for a response that will never come? Or is the opposite the case, that bureaucratic power makes unreasonable demands upon the living from a remote position marked by the infinite distance of estrangement and lack and that what this form of strange writing really needs is the endless questioning of the human in order to survive? In this case there is no way for the living to respond effectively to bureaucracy, to ever satisfy its need, because of the vast distance that separates life from the upwards abyss where rationality and endlessly circulating signs exist in splendid isolation. Although humans might contemplate these ideas, and try to respond to their demands, we will always fall short and must therefore try to come to terms with our (limited) earth-bound nature. Regardless of the conclusion we reach, either saying that the law is unable to meet our needs or concluding that we are somehow incapable of matching up to its demands, the essential problem remains the same one concerning the lack of connection, relation, and proportion between the system of writing and the prosthetic Gods or creatures who either look to transvaluate the law or stare into the blizzard of signs trying to make sense and find some place they can call their own.

This is, of course, precisely the problem we find at the centre of Max Weber’s[[19]](#endnote-19) work on bureaucratic rationality, and what he calls the iron cage, which comes to stand in for the Protestant God, but never provides the kind of certainty one might expect to receive from divine power. Akin to the remote God of the Calvinists who knows whether people are either saved or damned, but remains silent on the matter asking them to instead have faith in the goodness of His decisions, the modern form of bureaucracy that Weber thinks emerged from the rationalisation of Calvinist uncertainty simultaneously creates and seeks to resolve the anxiety left behind by the death of God. Thus Weber’s theory of rational bureaucracy reflects the problem of ancient writing Plato captures in his *Phaedrus* in respect of the way in which it endlessly defers presence and suggests the possibility of meaning coming to you sometime in the future[[20]](#endnote-20).

But this is not the end of the story. The other important similarity between Plato’s story and Weber’s sociology of bureaucracy revolves around what we might call their comparable treatment of ‘the fallen nature of writing’. We know that Plato links the fall to Theuth’s present of the textual pharmakon and the separation of writing (absence) from speech (presence), but Weber develops a similar argument in his classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism[[21]](#endnote-21)*, which shows how religious thought and value rationality eventually produce the fallen mode of writing (bureaucracy) that is governed by its own internal logic (instrumental rationality) without reference to an outside. According to Weber[[22]](#endnote-22), this situation was brought about by the salvation anxiety of the Calvinists who were determined to identify signs and symbols of the decision making process of the remote God who separates the saved from the damned and in this way produce certainty in the world. Unfortunately, however, Weber’s story is a tragic one, because the Calvinists’ strategy only ends up causing a Godless universe where authority is (1) brought crashing down to earth and (2) projected into the meaninglessness of instrumental rationality and bureaucratic logic. Weber explains that this happens because the Calvinists’ search for signs of salvation leads them to seek out worldly success in matters of business, which they believe would provide evidence that God is on their side, with the result that they gradually rationalise their conduct. In the first instance this rationality takes the form of what Weber calls value rationality, since the Calvinists’ rationality operates in the name of God (value), but this is only ever a temporary situation and the process of rationalisation eventually consumes the idea of the divine in the creation of an entirely self-sustaining model of instrumental rationality.

In this new modern situation (1) God is out of the picture, (2) the Calvinists become capitalists who work for the sake of working and making money, and (3) the authority of religious thought passes over to the instrumental rationality of the bureaucratic state. Enter the iron cage. Whereas God’s power was founded on charisma and value (belief), in his *Economy and Society[[23]](#endnote-23)* Weber explains the organisation of the iron cage and shows how modern, secular authority becomes diffuse across the state’s structures and systems. Thus he shows how the modern bureaucratic state relies on an idea of legal jurisdiction, hierarchical institutional structures, the circulation of files containing written documentation, role specialisation, systems of rules and regulations, and a commitment on the part of bureaucrats to upholding this impersonal structure. Where the operators of bureaucracy are concerned, Weber explains that they must be committed to precision, speed, unambiguous decision making, knowledge of files, maintaining continuity and unity of operation, and the reduction of friction. Finally Weber explains that this system functions on the basis of a logic of dehumanisation, distance, and coldness though the cost of this functionality is not lost on him, which is that humans are cast out, made homeless, and thrown into the abyss of meaninglessness that Nietzsche[[24]](#endnote-24) thought was essential to the experience of the modern. Despite bureaucratic storms of rules, regulations, and technical writing, Weber’s human, who lives in meaning, cannot find peace within the Godless system because it lacks value and is defined by disenchantment[[25]](#endnote-25).

Since there is no possibility of believing in this system, Weber’s Nietzschean suggestion for surviving the totally rationalised, bureaucratic world is to turn to vocation and the creation of a unified personality able to make meaning and oppose the transformation of people into so many objects and tools through the progressive re-enchantment of the world. In effect, I think that it is possible to identify the same kind of argument running through Kafka’s work on bureaucratic power, but with a tighter focus upon the meaning of writing. That is to say that where Weber opposes vocation, calling, and personality to the totally rationalised bureaucratic system, what we find in Kafka’s novels and short stories is the opposition between two kinds of writing. This is what Corngold, Greenberg, and Wagner’s[[26]](#endnote-26) studies of Kafka’s office works reveal. They capture the interplay of Kafka’s two systems - comprising on the one hand a model of writing focused on organising the world in the wake of the death of God and the retreat of transcendental authority and on the other hand a form of writing committed to understanding and making sense of the experience of total rationalisation and bureaucratisation – and show how the author came to embody this relation through his own writing practice[[27]](#endnote-27).

By focusing on what they call Kafka’s *Schriftstellersein* or ‘writerly being’[[28]](#endnote-28) Corngold, Greenberg, and Wagner show how he was never present to himself, but rather split between the bureaucratic writer of accident insurance reports and other documentation and the novelist and short story writer concerned to make sense of the experience of living in a hyper-rationalised world. In their view it is the interplay between these two forms of writing within Kafka’s work that produces the uncanny effect that colours texts such as *The Metamorphosis[[29]](#endnote-29)* where the explicit horror of estrangement is opposed by an objective, bureaucratic style that similarly reflects the loss of humanity and unhomeliness which had become the general condition of the world. In order to explain the origins of this style, Corngold and Wagner[[30]](#endnote-30) point out that Kafka was working in the context of the rise of the social physics of Belgian theorist Adolphe Quetelet who sought to use quantitative methods of data collection to produce accounts of society and ‘the average man’ who does not exist, but becomes a kind of abstract norm against which living beings are measured, assessed, and judged. Under conditions of the rise of this new kind of sociology, which entered the mainstream through Durkheim’s[[31]](#endnote-31) work on suicide and continues to colour the social sciences in the present, the problem of the bureaucratised world became about the relationship between the abstract mean, the norm, and statistical constructs of reality, and deviation, abnormality, and individual cases that seemed to run counter to what one would expect on the basis of the quantitative vision of the world, but which paradoxically appear to capture reality in its singular expression.

For Corngold and Wagner, it is possible to understand Kafka’s writing and thinking in terms of this tension between the norm, law, or logos that does not exist and the existential experience of the individual caught in its crushing gravitational field. Referring specifically to Kafka’s day job working in accident insurance in Bohemia, they make the point that the tension between the statistical certainty of the accident that will happen, and the experience of the individual who experiences this necessary event that clearly occurs purely by chance but at the same time reveals its random necessity the moment it happens to the individual, haunts stories such as *The Castle[[32]](#endnote-32)*. Here, the terrible certainty of Weberian bureaucracy is complicated by a sense that what is certain emerges from a place of enormous distance, the law of large numbers, that feels entirely contingent, empty, and meaningless the moment it reaches the individual. Thus the problem of bureaucracy in Kafka is less the Weberian collapse of value towards the pointlessness of instrumental rationality and more what Corngold and Wagner[[33]](#endnote-33) call a kind of ‘regular evil’ that plunges humanity into a state of existential anxiety. Reflecting upon the problem of living under a bureaucratic God, who operates on the basis of the law of large numbers without love, hate, or significance, Corngold and Wagner[[34]](#endnote-34) note that Kafka owned a copy of Thomas Masaryk’s work on suicide and suggest that this inspired his characterisation of men lost in Quetelet’s quantitative universe.

But unlike Durkheim[[35]](#endnote-35), who would later transform suicide into a social fact in the name of emptying the individual of all agency (hence Durkheimian sociology may be seen to rely on a kind of totalitarian methodology), Kafka’s interest in suicide was focused upon the impossibility of living in a world of bureaucratic law that seems simultaneously absolutely fatal and entirely contingent. Regardless of bureaucratic attempts to govern the quantitative universe, Howard Caygill[[36]](#endnote-36) explains that Kafka’s work was about capturing the impossibility of trying to assign meaning through the imposition of remote, objective law and illustrates this through reference to the impotence of the machine (*In the Penal Colony[[37]](#endnote-37)*), process (*The Trial[[38]](#endnote-38)*), and administration (*The Castle[[39]](#endnote-39)*) in his work. Accidents, mistakes, and breakdowns colour every effort to establish meaningful certainty in Kafka’s world with the result that he turned to so many animals to capture the experience of living under a kind of natural law that undermines the human ability to make sense of the environment with a view to plotting a meaningful route through life. Although Gregor Samsa is the most famous of these creatures, Seyppel’s[[40]](#endnote-40) work on the animal theme in Kafka establishes the centrality of the nonhuman in his wider work and the relationship of this figure to ideas of the (Freudian) father, authoritarianism, and bureaucratic dehumanisation.

In the teeth of rationalisation and bureaucratic attempts to map the world, and the endless struggle of existential man to save some sense of significance under conditions that seem to endlessly empty life of meaning, how then should we live? While Nietzsche imagined modern man balanced on a tightrope over the abyss of meaninglessness in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, and in this way suggested the need to create meaning in the void, Caygill[[41]](#endnote-41) refers to Kafka’s *Zurau Aphorisms* (see aphorism I)[[42]](#endnote-42) where Nietzsche’s tightrope becomes a tripwire that causes stumbles, accidents, and falls and endlessly thwarts the attempt to impose meaning upon the world. Caygill’s point is, therefore, that while Nietzsche thought modern man must create and impose his own meaning upon the world, Kafka’s existentialism became about living with a life without law. Thus the deep sense of loss that pervades Kafka’s work leads him to prefer stasis, standstill, and a kind of glacial immobility to the endless struggle to create significance. Paul North[[43]](#endnote-43) calls this Kafka’s ‘yielding’, and his making peace with the abyss, which we might oppose to Deleuze and Guattari’s[[44]](#endnote-44) famous post-Freudian reading of his work, where everything in Kafka becomes about mobility and the struggle to accelerate the paranoia of process (the German title of *The Trial* is *Der Prozess*) towards post-oedipal, schizophrenic collapse. In this reading Kafka’s creature is less a symbol of subjection and dehumanisation and more a representation of the possibility of escape from oedipal repression and organisation. Deleuze and Guattari’s becoming-animal is thus a kind of embodiment of the breakdown of repressive bureaucratic order and reflection of the post-oedipal freedom to come.

The debate about Kafka’s response to the bureaucratic vacuum of meaning is, therefore, one that revolves around the relative merits of mobility, and striking out in search of freedom beyond repression and authority, and immobility, where withdrawal and yielding short-circuits power through an acceptance of meaninglessness. While the first course of action holds onto the possibility of a meaningful universe, the risk of mobility is that resistance energises power, and ends up creating an endless dynamic of arbitrary law and its transgression. By contrast the second course of action that accepts meaninglessness, and that there is no other place better or somehow more meaningful than where we are now, risks supporting the arbitrary rule of nobody, endless bureaucracy, and the emergence of radical evil in the space hollowed out by what Corngold and Wagner[[45]](#endnote-45) write about in terms of Kafka’s discovery of the regular evil of large numbers and statistical determinacy / contingency. The problem of both of these alternatives to the void of bureaucratic power in the Godless universe of modernity is that it is possible to find evidence of cases where they were equally supportive of the rule of nobody in the 20th century. This much becomes clear from reading Hannah Arendt’s[[46]](#endnote-46) work on Nazi (and to a lesser extent, Soviet) totalitarianism and later explorations of the post-World War II horror of the social in her book *The Human Condition[[47]](#endnote-47)*.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt expands upon Weber’s critique of bureaucratic rationality and Kafka’s story of the tension between the law and existential man by showing how the violence implicit in their explorations of bureaucracy became explicit and fully realised in Nazi and Soviet totalitarianism. In the first part of the book, she explains the origins of totalitarian bureaucracy in terms of British colonial rule by showing how figures like Lord Cromer (who oversaw colonial government in Egypt in the late 19th century) constructed highly mobile, ad hoc forms of bureaucratic organisation in order to manage environments where the state was not already present, but had to be prefabricated in order to discipline and rationalise the colonized other who was considered less than human[[48]](#endnote-48). Under these conditions, the key principle of colonial bureaucracy became the exception and the ability of the executive to make law on the run in order to respond to highly uncertain conditions. According to Arendt[[49]](#endnote-49), the Nazis imported this idea of the lawless law, law of the moment, or concept of bureaucratic writing constantly in process, in order to respond to what they saw as the emergency situation of Weimar Germany. However, the idea of highly mobile bureaucracy endlessly in the process of being written and rewritten was not simply the result of necessity in the Nazi case, which is to say a response to the need to impose social order and so on, since the ability to make and remake law in order to respond to immediate circumstance meant that it was also possible to solve the Weberian problem of the meaninglessness of bureaucratic rule.

Whereas the objective of Weberian bureaucracy was the creation of rational order, the Nazi adaptation of this system made rational order subordinate to the demands of what Weber thought was missing from the modern bureaucratic system in the shape of national purpose, vocation, and sense of a mission. In this respect Arendt shows how Nazi bureaucracy sidestepped the problem of meaninglessness that Weber criticised in the Prussian model by making sure the law was never simply objective, but rather had a purpose which was to provide structure and organisation to the mobility and movement into the future of a community of fate (the post-World War I Front Generation) traumatised and thrown into existential crisis by the events of 1918 through the Paris peace conference to Weimar and the economic chaos unleashed by the Wall Street Crash. Thus Arendt[[50]](#endnote-50) explains totalitarian bureaucracy in terms of the organisation of a mission, meaning that the exception is ever present, waiting to be evoked in the name of furthering the overall objective of the national project. Given that this effectively rendered every rule and regulation provisional, it was a complete subversion of Weber’s ideal type of bureaucracy relating to certainty and lack of ambiguity. Similarly, where Weber’s idea of bureaucratic transparency was concerned, Arendt[[51]](#endnote-51) explains that Nazi bureaucracy functioned in a particular way concerned to create the impression of normality and smooth out the breaks in procedure and radical shifts in process and objective. In this situation, transparency was countered by the utilitarianism of opacity set up to obscure the reality of the violence of executive power.

Where Weber’s vision of bureaucracy was premised upon the idea of hierarchy and clear and transparent lines of command and control, Arendt’s[[52]](#endnote-52) idea of the onion-like structure of totalitarian administrative organisation is more Kafkaesque in respect of the ways in which it employs strategies of opacity, cloudiness, and uncertainty for the sake of appearing to maintain coherence and order. Explaining the idea of onion-like organisation, Arendt explains that successive layers of the party or bureaucratic structure simultaneously faced towards the centre of the organisation, leading to access to particular forms of information and more radical views, and looked out to the periphery of the structure and the less radical, less committed, fringe players working to engage outsiders. On the periphery, the radical views of centre of the organisation effectively vanished or appeared in washed out form in order that they might be made more acceptable to outsiders less committed to the cause. Contra Weber, who assumed the absolute transparency of the bureaucratic system, the entire objective of totalitarian bureaucracy in Arendt was thus to obfuscate in the name of normalising or softening the radical message of the movement in the name of maintaining power.

At the centre of the onion Arendt locates the leader who holds absolute power and commands the movement. The role of the leader is to drive the movement towards its overall objective by means of terror, which ensures that Arendt’s vision of totalitarian bureaucracy appears more Kafkaesque than Weberian where the issue of the individual’s relation to power is concerned. Whereas in the Weberian case the problem of the relation to power revolves around lack of meaning, we have seen how Kafka’s writing extends this insight by emphasising the arbitrary nature of power and the sense of contingency that comes with the feeling of fatal determinism. In Arendt’s[[53]](#endnote-53) analysis of totalitarianism, lack of meaning (or at least objective) disappears before the idea of the national cause and terror of arbitrary power enacted through highly mobile bureaucracy comes to the fore. Under conditions of terror Arendt explains that the wider world, where the idea of ‘world’ refers to the symbolic structures that provide significance and coordinates for individual action, collapses and the movement legislates over the meaning of reality. At this point, there is nothing beyond the movement, hence the use of the term ‘totalitarianism’. While it is possible to make the case that Kafka represents this condition of subjection through the figure of creature[[54]](#endnote-54), Arendt focuses upon the ‘worldless’ environment that takes away people’s ability to engage in (political) action. Thus, Arendt[[55]](#endnote-55) show how totalitarianism turns the world into a desert. Now there is nothing left but arbitrary bureaucratic rule and behavioural reflex.

However, Arendt’s view is that the problem of bureaucratic domination and arbitrary rule does not end with totalitarianism and her later work on democratic politics points to the danger of taking society for a basic administrative process concerned with nothing more than the organisation of pseudo-natural metabolism[[56]](#endnote-56). Akin to Adorno and Horkheimer[[57]](#endnote-57) who fused Weber’s theory of instrumental rationality with Marx’s explanation of commodity fetishism in order to produce the idea of the culture industry, Arendt[[58]](#endnote-58) explains that democratic capitalism has replaced politics with economics led by bureaucracy. Under these conditions bureaucracy becomes universal and the kind of citizenship the Greeks thought made humans human vanishes into a utilitarian calculus which is no longer simply industrial, but also biological in its focus upon the life process. Reading Arendt’s *The Human Condition* in the context of cold war politics, Hanna Fenichel Pitkin[[59]](#endnote-59) links this concern with the connection between economics and life to the sci-fi horror of the blob that unthinkingly consumes everything unfortunate enough to cross its path and C. Wright Mills[[60]](#endnote-60) critique of the military-industrial complex that similarly cancels political difference through its transformation of society into a kind of metabolic process.

Indeed, in much the same way that both Weber and Kafka wrote against the bureaucratisation of the world, Arendt came to see that society itself had become a kind of flat, entirely undifferentiated indifferent entity. But unlike Weber, who focused upon the hierarchical nature of bureaucratic authority, and to some extent Kafka, who still connected power to the verticality of the phallic castle, even though he knew that there was really nobody behind the walls of the edifice, the true horror of Arendt’s[[61]](#endnote-61) vision of the bureaucratic, administrative, process is that it is completely empty and truly is the rule of nobody. This was, of course, Arendt’s final conclusion in her Eichmann book[[62]](#endnote-62): Eichmann was not evil in the radical sense (in this instance evil is a kind of Kantian ethic carried out for its own sake), but rather in the banal sense that he never really thought about his actions, beyond trying to meet targets and carry out orders. Thus she concludes that since bureaucracy is unthinking, in the sense that thought requires one to look beyond the confines of the set of rules one currently operates within, it is capable of putting into practice the most radically evil schemes and looking upon this work with complete indifference. In this way Arendt shows how bureaucracy has the potential to transform radical evil into banality and cancel any kind of ethical objection, with the result that she thought that the central problem of the post-totalitarian period was the separation of thought from reality and the bureaucratic management of the life process and the need to reconnect thinking to practical concerns in order to create thoughtful institutions able to resist processes of rationalisation and objectification[[63]](#endnote-63). Given this view, in the conclusion of the article I want to move beyond Arendt and the German critique of the bureaucratic world to consider the fate of bureaucracy in Foucault’s work on governmentality and neoliberalism. Following this work I seek to oppose Stiegler’s[[64]](#endnote-64) theory of the neganthropocene to the problem of universal abstraction and what I have called strange writing in the name of imagining a living bureaucracy of the body scaled and in proportion to the finitude of the planet / world.

**III**

**Against the Neoliberal Bureaucratisation of the World**

Despite Arendt’s[[65]](#endnote-65) suggestion for the reconnection of thought and reality in order to oppose the estrangement of society and the life process from politics and motivated action, it is possible to argue that the exact opposite has happened under conditions of neoliberal globalisation. Following Hibou[[66]](#endnote-66), it is possible to make that case that since the late 1970s the bureaucratisation of the world and the rule of nobody has increased on the basis that the globalisation of economic processes requires connection across borders and cultural systems that is only possible at a high level of quantitative and qualitative abstraction. In other words, governmental reason ends up resting upon number, abstract technical language, and schematic ways of thinking about the world in order to manage the enormous levels of complexity that come with global interconnection. But, as Michel Foucault[[67]](#endnote-67) shows in his various works on neoliberal governmentality, the irony of the rise of this form of universal bureaucratisation is that it started out being about thinking through the limits of government. Foucault[[68]](#endnote-68) makes this point early on in his seminar on biopolitics and neoliberalism, where he explains that the key problem of the history of liberal political thought has been about where to strike the balance between individual freedom and government regulation. Beyond the classical Hobbesian problem of politics, which focuses upon the possibility of moving from a savage state of nature where men are wolves to other men into a society organised around a contract to live together more or less peacefully, the major liberal concern was always about how much freedom men have to give over to government in order to make society work.

According to Foucault[[69]](#endnote-69), the liberal tradition found the answer to this question in the Platonic / Christian idea of shepherding (or what he calls pastoral power), where the role of government becomes about taking care of people and enabling their freedom within limits. Under these conditions the role of law is to create a social environment for men to express their freedoms, but not limit their behaviour within this structure. In Foucault’s[[70]](#endnote-70) work on the rise of neoliberalism, it was this approach to government that eventually led to the rise of the biopolitical state where the apparent objective of bureaucracy becomes key to the neutral management of population and the security of the social environment. In this situation Foucault[[71]](#endnote-71) explains that the state polices the population on the basis of the kind of statistical evidence the social physics first started to produce in the 18th century and an economic worldview concerned with the distribution of goods.

Under these circumstances it is easy to see why bureaucracy became essential to the management of questions around distribution, security, health, and ensuring the normalisation of behaviour within the parameters established by the social contract. Those who step outside of these contractual limits, which Foucault shows end up covering more or less every aspect of human life, become pathological and in need to normalisation through the institutions of the state (the asylum, hospital, prison, school, university). Hence Foucault’s great philosophical-historical project running from *Madness and Civilization[[72]](#endnote-72)* through *Discipline and Punish[[73]](#endnote-73)* up to *The History of Sexuality[[74]](#endnote-74)* concerns the identification of pathological others and the various schemes for normalisation, including most famously Bentham’s panopticon. Although Foucault sets out potential for resistance to power in these books, particularly in the final volume of *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self[[75]](#endnote-75),* there is a sense in which his appeal to individual ethics fails to engage with the problem of the bureaucratic state set out in his earlier works.

Notwithstanding this point, by tracing the rise of the bureaucratic state from Plato’s *Statesman* through Machiavelli’s *Prince* up the post-World War II rise of the ordo-liberals in West Germany who wanted to create a strong state complete with a social policy to enable economic success, Foucault’s seminar on biopolitics explains how contemporary society has ended up in the nightmarish situation Will Davies[[76]](#endnote-76) paints in his work on the limits of neoliberalism. Following the insights of Weber, Kafka, and Arendt on the problem of bureaucracy, Davies’ thesis is that neoliberalism entails the disenchantment of politics by economics and the emergence of a closed system of rules and regulations that make no appeal to higher value, simply because reference to external authority is impossible in a system based upon instrumental rationality. However, following both Kafka and Arendt who similarly wrote about arbitrary nature of power, Davies[[77]](#endnote-77) makes the point that precisely because neoliberalism has no sense of value, justification, or wider rationale, it constantly falls back on the exception and executive decision making that undermine the very ideas of bureaucratic objectivity, consistency, and rationality that Hibou argues form of core principles of neoliberal managerialism.

While Hibou[[78]](#endnote-78) extends the Weberian idea of bureaucracy, explaining the pervasive formalisation and universal abstraction of the neoliberal approach to knowing the world, she is less clear about the contrast between this strategy of estrangement and the rise of sovereign power that is beyond rules and regulations. In this situation power operates with more or less complete freedom, falling back on reference to objective data (what is given and therefore cannot be opposed) in order to defend decision making based upon a particular way of knowing the world, which is seen to be superior to that of the embodied individual on the basis of its abstract quality. This is, however, where we reach the crux of the problem of neoliberal bureaucracy, and centrally what Hibou calls the bureaucratisation of the world, which is that its commitment to abstraction and estrangement has led to a situation where the symbolic systems that govern the human world are now completely out of kilter with the biosphere and the environment that sustains bodies and thus threaten to bureaucratise (write) life out of existence. Referring to Derrida’s[[79]](#endnote-79) *Specters of Marx*, we might therefore say that ‘the time is out of joint’ and suggest that this moment of extreme estrangement is the point when we must return to the idea of pharmakon – the poison which is also the remedy - with a view to thinking about the ways in we might differentiate the strange writing of neoliberal bureaucracy in the name of discovering a more human, animal, or organic form of writing appropriate to responding to the problems of life in a historical period marked by the exhaustion of the organic. What, then, are the prospects for this kind of pharmacological shift today?

In his early works (see the first two volumes of *Disbelief and Discredit[[80]](#endnote-80)*) Stiegler tells the story of the estrangement of human significance in number and meaningless signs resulting in the horror of symbolic misery. In his most recent books - *The Automatic Society[[81]](#endnote-81)*, *The Neganthropocene[[82]](#endnote-82)* – he explores what happens when processes of high tech globalisation move beyond melancholia for what he calls the lost spirit of capitalism[[83]](#endnote-83) and start to run into the limit of the Anthropocene. At this point the Weberian search for meaning is buried beneath the normalisation of symbolic misery, reactive behaviour, and automation and algorithmic capitalism lifts the logic of bureaucracy towards a new level comprising even faster speeds and more general types of abstraction[[84]](#endnote-84). According to Stiegler, this movement represents the end of the story which he starts with Plato’s *Protagoras[[85]](#endnote-85)* and the myth of Epimetheus and processes of hominisation, tool use, and the emergence of the (Freudian) prosthetic God[[86]](#endnote-86). Following his reading of Plato’s myth of Epimetheus, which explains how the human is always already in default, absent to itself, and only able to survive through the use of technics, Stiegler[[87]](#endnote-87) explains that men have lost control of technology in a process of progressive disorientation and estrangement. Despite the apparent fatality of this Heideggerian story, however, Stiegler continues to believe in the power of Derrida’s pharmakon – the remedy and the poison, the poison and the remedy – and the possibility that we might be able to re-humanise the technical supplement on a scale appropriate to the needs of human life. Given the scale of the estrangement of the symbolic systems of techno-bureaucratic capitalism from life in the Anthropocene - or what I would prefer to call the Mechanocene in order to emphasise that this historical period is inherently violent towards humans (and all other forms of life) - Stiegler’s[[88]](#endnote-88) idea of the neganthropocene is about trying to imagine ways to move beyond a kind of Promethean humanism hostile to the biosphere and organic existence through re-enchantment and the construction of a culture of meaningful symbols, writing, and communication.

Thus the work of the neganthropocene might need to start by opposing the bureaucratisation of life that prevents the creation of meaningful symbols and finding new ways of knowing the world scaled and in proportion to the limits of body and biosphere that sustains life. As both Derrida[[89]](#endnote-89) and Stiegler[[90]](#endnote-90) point out, the human has always been marked by difference, writing, and technics and thus a reasonable balance between organic life and technological extension is proper to what we are. Working with symbols that develop organic being is to be human. But this is not where we find ourselves today. The history of thinking about bureaucracy from Weber through Kafka up to Arendt suggests a process of the progressive estrangement of writing from the organic body. We know that Foucault extends this story through his history of the domination of the body by institutions that transform life into an object of scrutiny, discipline, and normalisation. As we have seen Foucault’s various histories suggest that within these hyper-rational discourses the body is considered fundamentally pathological and that there is no way for humans to escape humiliation before power. There is, in other words, no way to become normal. This is why I think we need to reverse the modern logic that Foucault reveals, and abandon the process of abstraction from the body into a kind of strange writing that confronts humans like some alien script, and invent a new kind of organisational writing closer to literature which understands the contingencies and imperfections of life and does not try to rationalise these out of existence. These contingencies and imperfections are what matter, what make us human, and must be valued on this basis. Perhaps we might institutionalise these vulnerabilities in the invention of a new form of bureaucracy, an neganthropomorphic bureaucracy, a bureaucracy of the organic body sensitive to the fragility and uncertainty of creaturely, human life.

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