ON LEVIATHAN'S TAIL: ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDIES OF BUREAUCRACY AND BUREAUCRATS

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Abstract: This article precedes a selection of papers written as a result of the seminar on the anthropology of bureaucracy in modern Russia. The text offers a brief overview of the development of research into bureaucracy, where studies are mainly made in a polemic with Max Weber's model of the "ideal" bureaucracy. It considers the most significant works that preceded the emergence of an interest in bureaucracy on the part of social scientists, written in the fields of political science and sociology and united by the method of participant observation. The authors pay attention to the difficulties in distinguishing the anthropology of bureaucracy as an independent field, which, on the one hand, is integrated into political anthropology and on the other hand, tends towards the social studies of professions. The article suggests understanding the anthropology of bureaucracy primarily as a certain viewpoint focusing on how management is implemented and how the "state" is reproduced and felt within bureaucratic institutions. The authors distinguish several popular areas in the field of social research into bureaucracy: critical works analyzing primarily the structural violence of bureaucrats against citizens through client classifications, bureaucratic arbitrariness, etc.; works that focus on the moral and affective aspect of bureaucracy, including the moral dilemmas of employees and their feelings; works devoted to the material world of bureaucracy, where documents become important participants in social interaction; research on the experience of interaction with bureaucracy as a client. In addition, the article provides an overview of existing studies (mainly) of the street-level Russian bureaucracy, performed using anthropological methods within the boundaries of different disciplines.

Keywords: political anthropology, anthropology of bureaucracy, street-level bureaucracy, officials.

To cite: Zakharova A., Martynenko A., 'On Leviathan's Tail: Anthropological Studies of Bureaucracy and Bureaucrats', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 2024, no. 20, pp. 63–91.

doi: 10.31250/1815-8870-2024-20-20-63-91

URL: http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng020/zakharova_martynenko.pdf

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This article precedes a selection of papers written as a result of the seminar on the anthropology of bureaucracy in modern Russia. The text offers a brief overview of the development of research into bureaucracy, where studies are mainly made in a polemic with Max Weber's model of the "ideal" bureaucracy. It considers the most significant works that preceded the emergence of an interest in bureaucracy on the part of social scientists, written in the fields of political science and sociology and united by the method of participant observation. The authors pay attention to the difficulties in distinguishing the anthropology of bureaucracy as an independent field, which, on the one hand, is integrated into political anthropology and on the other hand, tends towards the social studies of professions. The article suggests understanding the anthropology of bureaucracy primarily as a certain viewpoint focusing on how management is implemented and how the "state" is reproduced and felt within bureaucratic institutions. The authors distinguish several popular areas in the field of social research into bureaucracy: critical works analyzing primarily the structural violence of bureaucrats against citizens through client classifications, bureaucratic arbitrariness, etc.; works that focus on the moral and affective aspect of bureaucracy, including the moral dilemmas of employees and their feelings; works devoted to the material world of bureaucracy, where documents become important participants in social interaction; research on the experience of interaction with bureaucracy as a client. In addition, the article provides an overview of existing studies (mainly) of the street-level Russian bureaucracy, performed using anthropological methods within the boundaries of different disciplines.

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Bureaucracy, detested and desired

The usual ideas of bureaucracy relate to an image of an oddly constructed state machine, full of meaningless requirements and exhausting queues, that overwhelms one with paperwork to the rhythmical thudding of rubber stamps. Bureaucracy is associated with Kafkaesque absurdity and seeming dysfunction, where, as in Sergey Eisenstein and Grigoriy Aleksandrov's film *The General Line* (1929), the bureaucrat, with a sense of his own importance, traces an unbelievably long signature on sheets of paper. At the same time, the skill of dealing with bureaucrats is part of the set of practices that are necessary for survival in a state when, as in the computer game *Bureaucracy* (1987) in order to overcome a long series of bureaucratic obstacles, one must correctly reconstruct the grammar of the language of bureaucracy, while at the same time not allowing one's blood pressure to rise to lethal levels.

As the Norwegian political scientist Johan Olsen notes, bureaucracy is conventionally criticised

for two mutually exclusive reasons: for impersonal bureaucratisation, or, on the contrary, for not being impersonal enough [Olsen 2006: 5–6]. On the one hand, the idea of a strict adherence to rules and indifference to personal circumstances, which is central to the "ideal bureaucracy", may contradict general ethical principles and seem cruel and irrational. In David Graeber's words, when bureaucratic procedures ignore "the subtleties of real social existence", it creates the impression among the public that "they are dealing with people who have for some arbitrary reason decided to put on a pair of glasses that allows them to see only 2 percent of what's in front of them" [Graeber 2015: 75]. On the other hand, bureaucracy is also criticised on the grounds that civil servants interpret the law in an arbitrary manner, break the rules laid down in the documentation, and allow their personal connections and interests to influence the process of their work. "Personal ties", "influence" and "corruption" are the invariable topics of conversations regarding the opposite of the first deficiency of bureaucracy, and that is not being bureaucratic enough.

Among the conditions for this sort of criticism is the identification of bureaucracy with the state, at which, as Vadim Volkov puts it, people direct the curses resulting from a simultaneous understanding of its coercive nature and a consciousness of its necessity [Volkov 2018: 12]. Nevertheless, as Tess Lea remarks, any criticism contains within itself a secret desire for a "proper" bureaucracy, a hope that it might be improved [Lea 2021: 69]. The vulnerability and at the same time the seduction of bureaucracy resonates with its dual nature: "Bureaucracy sucks the soul; bureaucracy is ethics in action. It stands in the way of freedom; it is freedom's insurance. It is a death threat with a baton behind its back; it is the rule of law. It has exploded under neoliberalism; it is the best defense against neoliberalism's predations" [Lea 2021: 61].

Ambivalent by nature, bureaucracy is a subject for research by scholars from various fields of the social sciences. Still, by comparison with sociology or political studies, interest in bureaucracy seems not to be particularly great in anthropology[1], or more precisely has not been until recently. This fact is evidently the result of "the traditional social science division of labor", which "left formal organizations to sociologists, political scientists, and economists, while anthropologists concentrated on non-modern, small-scale societies that were seen to operate without or independent of formal organizations" [Hull 2012b: 12]. It is, however, hardly possible to speak of the anthropology

[1] As Akhil Gupta and his co-authors note, even though anthropologists working in rural India always knew about the local schoolteachers, medics, development agents, keepers of the land registry and other government agents, these people are often "written out" of their accounts, because the modern state had no place in "village ethnography" [Gupta et al. 2015: 585].

of bureaucracy in isolation, preserving the boundaries between disciplines inviolate. Many works on bureaucracy by non-anthropologists are based on materials derived from participant observation. In this sense the anthropology of bureaucracy continues the tradition of social research on bureaucrats that has been conducted within different disciplines using the methods of anthropology. It is not so much a subdivision of anthropology as a particular (and entirely "interdisciplinary") research perspective that allows scholars to look at (state) administration through the eyes of the people on the other side of the office, who embody the state.

A short prehistory of the anthropology of bureaucracy

The starting-point for social studies on bureaucracy is Max Weber's theory of rational bureaucracy, elements of which were published in the posthumous edition of his *Economy and Society* that came out in 1921–22 [Weber 1978]. As fundamental characteristics of bureaucratism, Weber listed a strict demarcation of officials' responsibilities, the existence of a special training, the service hierarchy, and reliance on written documents and various instructions that clearly define every employee's tasks. Weber's bureaucrat, be he a civil servant or an employee of a commercial enterprise[1], is devoted to the idea of serving "the state", "the party", "the Church", or "the company", and the personal and official spheres of his life are strictly separated. Like a cog in a great machine, the bureaucrat acts predictably and in accordance with rational rules, without fear or favour [Weber 1978: 988]. Weber's "bureaucratic optimism" was evidently founded on his belief that bureaucrats, given the requisite education and clear instructions, could embody "the most perfect" type of rulership.

The first English translation of Weber's book came out in 1946, and this, together with the growth of bureaucratic structures in the USA, led to a wave of empirical studies of organisations. Their authors were often pursuing pragmatic aims: the researchers were supposed to find out how the labour process was organised in practice, so as to improve the firm's efficiency. Thus, from the 1940s to the 1960s there appeared in the USA social research based on a critique of Weber's bureaucracy as "organisation without people" (see, for example: [Stein 1952; Bennis 1959; Kaufman 1960; Blau 1966]). As they challenged Weber's thesis of the irreproachable rationality and impartiality of bureaucrats, sociologists and political scientists suggested that a closer look should be taken at how exactly interactions take place within bureaucratic structures. Anthropologists, who brought with them tools from research into the political

[1] The word "bureaucrat" came to be identified primarily with "civil servants" in the 1930s, as bureaucratic methods of administration became more prevalent [Graeber 2015: 13–14].

organisations of small communities, influenced the spread of ethnographic methods and increased attention to particular topics in research into industrial organisations [Hull 2012b: 12]. For example, one of the main theses of Peter Blau's work, which has become a classic study of bureaucracy, was that the "second face" of bureaucracy, an inalienable feature of it, were the informal relationships between colleagues [Blau 1966].

The critique of Weber's model of rational bureaucracy, and also an interest in officials' everyday working lives, formed the basis for a new direction of research into low-level, or, to use the original term, *street-level bureaucracy* (see the overview in [Maynard-Moody, Portillo 2010]). The American political scientists Michael Lipsky, Geoffrey Prottas and Michael Brown, the founders of this direction, studied the day-to-day work of the officials at the lowest level of the pyramid of state power [Lipsky 1969; 2010 (1980); Prottas 1979; Brown 1981]. The term "street-level bureaucrats" included police officers, schoolteachers, magistrates, social workers and other state and municipal officials who interacted with the public face to face. Their innovation was the assertion that street-level bureaucrats make policy and do not simply implement it [Lipsky 2010: XX]. According to the originators of this theory, street-level bureaucrats acquire political power thanks to their distance from the supervision of their superiors and to their *discretion*, that is, their ability to take independent decisions — an important concept in research into street-level bureaucracy.

In works published after the research by Lipsky and like-minded authors, street-level officials appear as people very different from the image of cogs in the state machine. Scholars began to take notice that in practice bureaucrats encounter dilemmas and difficulties: the lack of resources, the high demand for their services, raised expectations, contradictory instructions and rules and outcomes of their work that are hard to evaluate. Authors focused their research on the means by which street-level bureaucrats adapted to the specifics of their positions, their tactics in the everyday struggle to accomplish their work, and the techniques they used to justify their actions to themselves. The approach that included attention to the detail of everyday work and to street-level bureaucrats' choices and feelings, and which became established in the mainstream of the theory of street-level bureaucracy, proved important for further research.

From bureaucracy to bureaucrats: anthropological research

As we have said, the anthropology of bureaucracy cannot really be properly classified as a separate category of anthropological research. On the one hand, this might be problematic because research into

bureaucracy that is anthropological in terms of the methods used may belong not only to the discipline of anthropology, but equally to sociology or political studies, and this is noticeable in the overview presented, which includes works from various fields of the social sciences. On the other hand, the anthropology of bureaucracy is itself not homogeneous but presents a wide spectrum of research directions, corresponding to different fields of knowledge. One end of this spectrum gravitates towards social research into professions and organisations. Authors who work in this direction rely on the abovementioned theory of street-level bureaucracy and focus on one or another aspect of the everyday work of street-level bureaucrats. The other end of the spectrum falls within the boundaries of political anthropology and the anthropology of the state: researchers analyse the functioning of particular state institutions, placed in a specific political and social context.

It is worth noting that the anthropology of bureaucracy cannot be isolated from the anthropology of the state or, more widely, political anthropology: its relationship with the latter is that of species and genus. In this respect it would be fair to ask whether such research should be included under the label "the anthropology of bureaucracy", or whether it would make sense to refer it to the anthropology of the state or to political anthropology, without multiplying entities. In our opinion, the anthropology of bureaucracy is primarily a viewpoint directed in a particular manner, focusing on how administration is put into practice and how "the state" is represented and perceived within specific bureaucratic institutions. It should be noted that in research on the anthropology of the state, this last is regarded as being present in citizens' everyday life independently of their interaction with bureaucrats. At the same time, it is research in the field of the anthropology of bureaucracy that reminds us that "the state" itself consists of actual people, something that it is so tempting to forget when analysing the interactions of citizens with "faceless" state structures.

Since the time when the first anthropological works on bureaucrats were published, there does not seem to have been any waning of interest among anthropologists in the everyday life of officials in different departments or in the various mechanisms of state administration. This is demonstrated not only by the numerous articles and books on the anthropology of bureaucracy (it would appear impossible to list them all in a single text, and indeed hardly necessary), but also by the overviews[1] and thematic blocks in journals[2] that have appeared over the last decade. In this article,

[1] See: [Heyman 2012; Hull 2012a; Mathur 2017; Lea 2021].

[2] See, for example, the special issue of *Critique of Anthropology*, 2019, vol. 39, no. 2 'Immersion in the Bureaucratic Field: Methodological Pathways' and the issues of *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*,

which anticipates the first such listing of works by Russian researchers, we shall deal only with the basic tendencies in anthropological research into bureaucracy and with certain works that are the most important in the field.

The social critique of bureaucracy

Perhaps the academic works on the anthropology of bureaucracy best known to a wider readership are those by David Graeber. His *Utopia of Rules* [Graeber 2015] and *Bullshit Jobs* [Graeber 2018] represent a left-wing critique of bureaucracy as an instrument of administration by means of 'bureaucratic procedures [that] are ways to turn stupidity, as it were, against itself' and born of structural violence [Graeber 2015: 84]. While he reproaches bureaucracy for its indifference and impersonality, Graeber also calls the fact that it is not necessary to establish any personal relationships during bureaucratic interactions "the secret joys of bureaucracy". He introduces the concept of "interpretative labor", "the constant and often subtle work of the imagination, of endlessly trying to see the world from others' point of view"; "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" [Graeber 2015: 68, 71]. This has been important for the discussion of the hierarchical bureaucratic world. In other words, whoever is weak or oppressed in such a relationship is always trying to guess or interpret the actions of the stronger, while the reverse process is rarely observed. Graeber explains the mechanisms of such labour using the example of the actions of clients in trying to guess bureaucrats' intentions and priorities, and also of citizens' inability to resist instructions that are sometimes completely meaningless or the endless red tape that accompanies bureaucratic processes. He has devoted another book to a further essential aspect of bureaucracy that is relevant in a time of "total bureaucratization" (i.e. when the service and administrative sectors are growing rapidly) — the moral tension that is experienced by employees of various organisations on account of their own meaningless "bullshit jobs" or "shit jobs" at which they are forced to work and justify to themselves [Graeber 2018].

The social critique of bureaucracy is a popular direction in the anthropology of bureaucracy and probably one of the longest-lasting. Many anthropological works that analyse the classifications made by bureaucrats regarding citizens (for example: [Handelman 1981; Heyman 1995; Douglas 1986; Berda 2022]) belong to this tendency.

2015, vol. 33, no. 1 'Remaking the Public Good: A New Anthropology of Bureaucracy'; 2022, vol. 40, no. 2 'States of Feeling: Public Servants' Affective and Emotional Entanglements in the Making of the State'.

Such classifications are often the basis for the application of structural coercion, which may also be understood as the unequal and arbitrary provision of services to people on the basis of the category to which they are ascribed. "The single best-known anthropological work on bureaucracy", in David Graeber's opinion [Graeber 2012: 109] (one might add, apart from Graeber's own works), Michael Herzfeld's *The Social Production of Indifference* [Herzfeld 1992], is also devoted to classifications. The author focuses his attention on the phenomenon of bureaucratic indifference — "a rejection of those who are different, made tolerable to insiders" [Herzfeld 1992: 33]. He discovers the roots of this state indifference in these classifications, using which bureaucrats "batten on to an existing cultural vocabulary" [Herzfeld 1992: 57] and learn to use stereotypes for specific ends in their work. Although Herzfeld later explained that "bureaucrats may retain their personal sense of decency and use their understanding of the rules to benefit their clients" [Herzfeld 2015: 536], the reception of the "production of indifference" is usually a negative assessment. This work fits into the research tendency towards a social critique of bureaucracy, and specifically Western bureaucracy.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the overwhelming majority of works about bureaucrats by anthropologists have addressed the countries of the global South. Another classic work on the anthropology of bureaucracy, James Ferguson's *The Anti-Politics Machine* [Ferguson 1996 (1990)], is devoted to a critique of the concept of "development" as applied to the Kingdom of Lesotho in Africa. Through a detailed analysis of documents on the development of the highland region of Thaba-Tseka, he demonstrates how the discourse about Lesotho as a country with a peasant society and an isolated national economy is formulated. Addressing the politico-economic context, he goes on to explain how "development" projects do not produce the planned positive changes, because they contradict the local social norms. The "development" apparatus, as characterised by Ferguson, "is not a machine for eliminating poverty", as it wishes to appear, but in reality "an anti-politics machine, depoliticizing everything it touches, […] performing, almost unnoticed, its own pre-eminently political operation of expanding bureaucratic state power" [Ferguson 1996: XV].

Akhil Gupta's *Red Tape* [Gupta 2012] also represents a critique of bureaucracy in a "Third World" country, "animated by barely contained rage", as the author himself puts it [Gupta et al. 2015: 588]. Gupta views Indian bureaucracy as a process "shot through with contingency and barely controlled chaos" [Gupta 2012: 14]. Placing the biopolitics of poverty at the centre of his analysis, he views the corruption and systematic arbitrariness of Indian officials as a manifestation of structural violence and as part of wider politico-economic processes. At the same time, he is attentive to particular

incidents and practices. As Josiah Heyman notes "no simple model of domination, corruption, loss of services, extraction of value, etc." applies to Gupta's book. Rather he shows how the inhabitants of rural India "realistically draw the lessons that socio-political connections matter, as does cultural information on which officials to approach, what to offer, and what to ask for" [Heyman 2012: 1272]. The bureaucratic interactions described by Gupta are diverse in their specific means of distribution of power and in their results. For example, by means of writing — the chief instrument of bureaucratic power — the poor and illiterate inhabitants of India not only become victims of structural violence, but also obtain the means of resisting violence using written complaints and forged documents [Gupta 2012: 141–236].

The key works represented in this section cannot, then, be reduced to a one-sided enumeration of the negative aspects of bureaucracy pre-determined by the authors' political position. The ethnographic approach, with its attention to the bureaucratic discourse and various practices, permits us to look inside the black box of bureaucracy and discern what such-and-such formulations and actions really mean. Moreover, anthropological methods oblige authors with an initially hostile attitude to look at citizens' interactions with officials from different viewpoints. Thereby the ambivalent nature of bureaucracy, which oppresses both the citizens and the officials themselves, but at the same time leaves loopholes for freedom of action, is glimpsed through the critique.

In the heart of the state: the moral dilemmas and affects of civil servants

According to Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan, critical works about bureaucracy where the authors side with the clients are an example of "ideological populism": research turns into political projects [Bierschenk, Olivier de Sardan 2019: 245–246]. As an alternative to this approach they envisage a methodological populism, close to the ethnography of organisations. Focusing on the details of everyday life inside the organisation, this approach refers back to the beginnings of anthropology with its urge to study "the local point of view". An analysis of the everyday life and informal "practical norms" of bureaucrats (on this term see, for example: [Olivier de Sardan 2015]), the authors aver, helps in understanding of the reasons for officials' seemingly absurd actions, and in studying "rationality in context" [Bierschenk, Olivier de Sardan 2019: 246].

In his introduction to a collection of case studies with the catchy title *At the Heart of the State*, Didier Fassin notes that "institutions do more than just think, they also implement values and affects, judgments and sentiments" [Fassin 2015b: 8]. Taking account of this,

another tendency of ethnographical research into bureaucracy takes shape around "the moral world of institutions" — the values and emotions on which the policy (which is, in turn, created in practice by civil servants) is founded. Asking "how institutions evaluate and feel", the authors of the collection analyse the working routine of policemen and employment advisers, judges and social workers, prison officers and psychologists. Fassin identifies two necessary levels of this analysis: attention to the "moral economy" and to "moral subjectivity". By "the moral economy" he means "the production, circulation, and appropriation of values and affects, regarding a given social issue", common sense dissolved in a particular socio-historical context with regard to one or another social fact [Fassin 2015b: 9].

In parallel with this external moral code, thinks Fassin, there exists a more individualised code, which presupposes freedom of action and judgment on the part of employees. He calls this code "moral subjectivity". Therefore, according to Fassin, any analysis of the moral work of institutions must take into account both the tensions that exist in society linked to the problems of marginalised groups (the moral economy) and the actions in the professional (bureaucratic) world aimed at solving them (i.e. moral subjectivity). In accordance with this approach the authors of the collection, as they study the everyday life of the employees of various French bureaucratic institutions, try to combine the macro- and micro-social levels of moral subjectivities and thereby investigate "the warmer side of the state" [Fassin 2015a: X].

The question of the place of morality in bureaucratic practice is another strand of the polemic with Weber's concept of rational bureaucracy devoid of emotions and personal preferences. In defence of Weber's model, the sociologist Paul du Gay notes that by no means does it assume an absence of morality: quite the reverse, it asserts its highest form, supposing an equal attitude towards all clients [du Gay 2000; 2005]. According to his logic, the bureaucrat must practise a special "trained indifference", as a result of which he accepts the hierarchy that exists within the system, but at the same time rejects any personal moral judgments that might impede the impartial[1] execution of his work. However, in practice, particularly in the social services, bureaucrats inevitably encounter moral dilemmas: whom to help first? May one depart from the instructions or even bend the law in order to do one's work? Should one take one's personal impression of a client into account when working with him?

[1] On the "unemotional" attitude of street-level officials to their clients as "a bureaucratic virtue" see also: [Assor 2021].

Nerina Weiss and Nina Gren, studying the work of specialists at refugee reception centres in Norway and Sweden, use the concept of moral discomfort [Weiss, Gren 2021: 196]. This term denotes the particular reflective state that street-level bureaucrats need in order to act in conditions of the indeterminacy and ambiguity of goals and at the same time regard their work as satisfactory. Following a similar idea, Anne-Meike Fechter proposes using the concept of moral labour to describe the mental efforts that workers in Cambodian humanitarian organisations have to make every day to reconcile themselves to the unattainability of the goals of their work, which aims to help everyone in need [Fechter 2016].

Analysing how the employees of an American non-profit organisation[1] are daily 'engaged in a delicate moral craft […] by making creative use of the resources […] that their environment makes available to them', Bernardo Zacka speaks of frontline workers' moral dispositions [Zacka 2017: 150]. By this he means persistent ways of perceiving work situations and priority judgments in reacting to them [Zacka 2017: 66]. However, moral attitudes that have become routine are an object of his criticism. The persistence of three "pathological" moral attitudes that he identifies — "indifferent", "enforcer" and "caregiver" — in his view hinder a meaningful use of discretion by street-level bureaucrats and the alignment of their ways of reacting with individual cases. Zacka concludes that it is a negative aspect of bureaucracy that officials stop reflecting on the morality of their actions and in practice use clichés.

Alongside the moral dilemmas in bureaucrats' work, researchers (as in the collection edited by Fassin mentioned above) study the connection between civil servants' feelings, their professional practices, and the complex image of the state that depends in one way or another on emotional experiences. The editors of a special issue of *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* devoted to the feelings of bureaucrats note that the consideration of emotions and affects opens up new possibilities for the study of the "missing link" between images and practices of the state [Andreetta et al. 2022].

This interest on the part of anthropologists in bureaucrats' feelings is a consequence of the "affective turn" in political anthropology (and of the growing attention to emotions at the end of the twentieth century in the social sciences as a whole), and supposes a focus on the emotional experiences of the officials who embody the state. Starting from the idea that "the magic of the state" may be under-

[1] Non-profit organisations have also been the subject of research into the anthropology of bureaucracy (see, for example: [Routray 2017; Allen 2018; Ellison 2018; Timmer, Wirtz 2022]). Certain state functions were outsourced to them in the course of the New Public Management reforms, aimed at turning state administration into "a supermarket delivering a wide variety of public services, disciplined by market competition" [Olsen 2005: 6].

stood with the help of an ethnography of citizens' emotions (see, for example: [Aretxaga 2003; Navaro-Yashin 2009; Laszczkowski, Reeves 2015]), the authors of the articles in the special issue make new notes in the margins of *Economy and Society*, attempting "to go beyond the Weberian emotions / rationality divide in the work of government" [Andreetta et al. 2022: 9]. They study how sympathy, anxiety or anger influence the decisions of Malawian civil servants who are responsible for dealing with natural disasters [Hendriks 2022], try to understand the place of emotions for Belgian civil servants examining cases for the provision of social services [Andreetta 2022], elucidate how fear informs the everyday interactions between teachers and their superiors [Jarroux 2022], etc.

Researchers also examine civil servants' affects as an instrument of administration. For example, Birgit Sauer, Otto Penz and their co-authors centre their article on affective labour in neoliberal state bureaucracy, that is in bureaucracy that has been turned into a provider of services orientated on the client [Penz et al. 2017]. Using the examples of three cities in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, they analyse the affective subjectivity of civil servants at employment exchanges in their interactions with clients. According to the authors, the agents create an atmosphere of trust for their clients by demonstrating empathy and actively listening to them. This not only enables them to be more efficient, but is also a source of job satisfaction for them, provided by feedback from the clients. As the researchers show, by contrast, when there is a heavy workload and high probability of conflict, officials have recourse to affective labour, trying to act unemotionally (see also: [Yang 2021]) and to fill the resulting void with "bureaucratic noise" (for example, by stapling papers together). The authors conclude that civil servants' affective subjectivity is an important aspect of neoliberal governance, in the course of which administration is carried out by means of "affective practices" [Penz et al. 2017: 555–556].

At the same time, officials' affects are not only a resource that assists them in their work, but also a means of managing the civil servants (and, more broadly, the state) themselves. As noted by Jie Yang, who has studied the increasing numbers of suicides among Chinese officials, the local media and the government pathologise suicide, systematically, and without consulting specialists, finding the reasons for what has happened in psychological, bio-medicinal, but never social problems [Yang 2018]. Thus, presenting suicide as the "heartache" (*guan xinbing*) of individual officials, press articles and government reports implicitly construct the image of the "ideal" (rational and mentally healthy) subject of an autocratic state. According to Yang, the post mortem diagnosis of the civil servants distracts attention from the increasing problems within the bureaucratic system itself, while complex social, economic and

political contradictions (for example, the "unwritten rules", the struggle for power and gender norms [Yang 2019]) are presented as individual psychological disorders. Yang speaks of the therapeutic method of managing civil servants (therapeutic governance), showing how the psychologisation of bureaucratic policy serves various socio-political ends.

The materiality of bureaucracy

As Ben Kafka wittily remarks, bureaucracy added another form of government to the classic regimes of monarchy, democracy and aristocracy: rule by a piece of office furniture [Kafka 2012: 77]. In this sense the special "materiality" of bureaucracy is a perfectly logical thing to study. Such an approach is linked in the first place with Matthew Hull's *Government of Paper*[1] [Hull 2012b], where he proposes focusing on the material side of the process of administration, which has hitherto remained outside researchers' purview. Beginning with the existing idea of bureaucratic writing as nothing more than an instrument of control used by power structures (see, for example: [Foucault 1975; Goody 1986; Yates 1989; Drybread 2016]), Hull proclaims the necessity "[t]o analytically restore the visibility of documents, to look *at* rather than *through* them" [Hull 2012b: 13]. Following Latour in his approach, Hull shows how the documents and other material artefacts of the bureaucratic offices of Pakistan not only reflect existing relationships, but also influence them through their material properties, and may be means of expressing disagreement or for negotiating between the administrators and the administrated. According to his conclusions, documents have their own "graphic ideologies", and are "semiotic technologies, [...] material means for producing, interpreting, and regulating significance for particular ends" [Hull 2012b: 27]. In his review of research on the materiality of bureaucracy Hull remarks that documents "are not simply instruments of bureaucratic organizations, but rather are constitutive of bureaucratic rules, ideologies, knowledge, practices, subjectivities, objects, outcomes, even the organizations themselves" [Hull 2012a: 253].

Nayanika Mathur also addresses the "paper" aspect of bureaucracy and the state, but it is not so much the documents themselves that she studies as the processes behind their production. In her book *Paper Tiger* Mathur analyses the work of officials in the small town of Gopeshwar in northern India [Mathur 2015]. As she observes how two laws (the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the Wildlife Protection Act) are put into practice, she gives a detailed description of the everyday life of bureaucrats and their system of

[1] See the discussion of Hull's book in the journal of ethnographic theory *HAU*, 2013, vol. 3, no. 3.

producing *sarkar* — "statehood" or "governance". Mathur softens her criticism of bureaucracy. She notes that while citizens are often baffled by the laws, researchers have given little thought to the fact that the officials themselves have to overcome the state's "illegibility". Mathur emphasises that the officials know that the rules can never be followed to the letter, because when the laws come into contact with reality they turn out to be contradictory. The bureaucrats' chief energy is thus directed towards creating the appearance of carrying out major state projects, and the basic means by which this creation of "government" takes place is the production of documents [Mathur 2015: 3].

While Mathur was carrying out her fieldwork, a "man-eating cat" (*bagh*, a tiger or a leopard) started attacking the residents of Gopeshwar. The Wildlife Protection Act, which strictly forbids shooting big cats, came into direct conflict with the everyday security, and therefore the mobility of the residents of the town, who were forced to limit their going outside for fear of the predator. Mathur shows that the bureaucrats had to wait until the tiger had killed several people in order officially to designate the beast as dangerous and have it shot. The tiger's regular attacks on people, and the tragic deaths of several people, made the citizens angry and in their turn they called the state "a paper tiger",[1] that killed people as a result of its sluggishness[2].

As Kregg Hetherington remarks, "Documents are always encountered by particular people in particular contexts […] [who] all come to them with very different desires, politics, frames of indexical reference, and habits of interpretation" [Hetherington 2011: 8–9]. In his well-known book *Guerrilla Auditors*, constructed around bureaucratic documents, he studies how Paraguayan peasants (*campesinos*) engaged in the struggle for land that has been promised to them use "guerrilla auditing". Relying on the neoliberal ideals of transparency and accountability, the oppressed Paraguayans wage the war for their rights on the local élites in bureaucratic archives. As they collect various documents and learn how to interpret them in a particular way, guerrilla auditors create a legal landscape around themselves. Hetherington sums it up: "[T]he most important aspect of bureaucratic activity lies in its peculiar approach to creating and

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[1] This collocation also refers to the Chinese expression "paper tiger", now in international usage, which became popular thanks to Mao Tse-tung (see, for example: [Mao 1956]). It is used to characterise a person or community that seems mighty, but is in reality powerless.

[2] It is notable that at the beginning of her fieldwork Mathur was passed about from one state institution to another. It surprised the bureaucrats that she wanted to study how laws were put into actual practice. In each office she was told that if she really wanted to understand how state administration was organised, she was in the wrong place: in the government offices in Delhi she was directed to the small towns where the regulations are directly applied, and in little Gopeshwar to the capital, where the laws are invented by high officials.

reading inscriptions on paper" [Hetherington 2011: 148]. He stresses such aspects of documents as the potential of the information that they contain and their openness to different interpretations depending on the context. This perspective leads us to the next tendency.

The civil effects of bureaucracy

It is evident from what has been said above that ethnographical research into bureaucracy is not limited to the study of a professional group of civil servants. Bureaucracy comes into being in the interaction between bureaucrat and client, and so a full description of such an interaction presupposes an analysis both of the officials' perspective, and the view of those who use "public services". It would seem that it is from this side that it is easiest to see the flaws in a system that is *a priori* imperfect (on the complexities of bureaucracy encountered by users see, for example: [Griffiths 2013]). However, some anthropological research indicates that bureaucracy is not always perceived by citizens only as an insurmountable inconvenience.

In Hetherington's book the Paraguayan peasants use bureaucratic documents to increase the chances of their land claims, and in this sense guerrilla auditing is "a politics of hope" [Hetherington 2011: 231]. An analogous thought is expressed by Monique Nuijten, who has studied a collective form of land ownership in Mexico [Nuijten 2003]. Nuijten analyses the relations between ordinary Mexicans and the officials, who appear as extremely unreliable intermediaries in the matter of confirming the land to its owners. Despite constant deception on the part of the civil servants, mistrust and corruption, Mexicans continue to imagine "an exact map" of the boundaries between parcels of land, on which the land would be distributed fairly.

In Nuijten's opinion, people's belief that bureaucratic mechanisms in their ideal form really can help them allows political forces to maintain the image of bureaucracy as a "hope-generating machine". Discussions of monstrous corruption and the struggle against it distract the citizens from a fundamental critique of the state and allow politicians to assert that no radical changes within the system are needed: it would be enough to remove the "rotten" corrupt elements, and the state would finally be able to fulfil its responsibilities to its citizens as it should. In this way, Nuijten says, "The hope-generating machine continues its work" [Nuijten 2003: 174].

As Laura Bear and Nayanika Mathur observe in the introduction to the selection of articles on bureaucracy in *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology*, "bureaucracies are an expression of a social contract between citizens and officials that aim to generate a utopian order"

[Bear, Mathur 2015: 18]. The utopian aims of bureaucracy are connected with "public goods" — transparency, budget economy, marketisation and decentralisation in the service of transnational organisations. The legitimacy of bureaucratic institutions, in the authors' opinion, is based on the assertion that they exist for the public good, which the bureaucrats strive to realise in their practices. Bear and Mathur assert that the articles in the collection are intended "to lay the foundations for a focus on the ethical underpinnings and lines of social struggle that are hidden by the technical analysis of public goods in economics and development studies […] to restore the complexity of these engagements in which people pursue various pragmatic and utopian goals" [Bear, Mathur 2015: 21–22, 20]. The authors of the articles analyse the changes that take place under the influence of neoliberal politics. In particular, they deal with the contradictory reforms in Britain aimed at creating a "flexible" and "transparent" government [John 2015], and similar efforts in South Africa, where the desire to create a more open justice system is leading to bureaucrats being obsessed with performance indicators [Zenker 2015]. Ethnographic research into the processes of creating public goods helps to identify the transformations in the course of which the idea of the accessibility and transparency of the state is formulated and adapted by particular people at various levels of the bureaucratic system.

The relationship with the state formed through interaction between citizens and street-level officials is an important topic in ethnographic research into bureaucracy. As Amy Cooper has shown, doctors working in the state clinics of Venezuela, by expressing solidarity and sympathy (openly or inadvertently) play a significant role in forming their patients' political subjectivity [Cooper 2015]. According to her, Venezuelans, who are disappointed by the state's failure to fulfil its promises to use its oil wealth for the good of its citizens, see in manifestations of empathy and physical closeness by state medical workers an attempt to reduce socio-political inequality. Bio-medicinal encounters become politically significant, and a major role is played not only by the affects demonstrated during interactions, but also the physical habitus of the doctors' bodies[1].

At this point it seems appropriate to recall the words of Louis Althusser: "[L]'idéologie 'agit' ou 'fonctionne' de telle sorte qu'elle 'recrute' des sujets parmi les individus […] ou 'transforme' les individus en sujets […] par cette opération très précise que nous appelons *l'interpellation*, qu'on peut se représenter sur le type même de la plus banale interpellation policière (ou non) de tous les jours:

[1] Bureaucrats' corporeality and aspects of work associated with it has also received attention in social studies: see, for example: [Murphy 2006].

'hé, vous, là-bas!'" [Althusser 1973: 113][1]. Ethnographic research into bureaucracy allows us to understand how exactly bureaucrats participate, through their routine actions, in forming political subjectivity among the people.

On bureaucracy in Russia

Our brief review has sketched an extremely wide geography of social research into bureaucracy: the USA and India, countries in Africa and Asia, the neoliberal states of Europe and autocratic China. Examining the diversity of research approaches, addressing both regional peculiarities and common features in the practices of civil servants, we should like to pay special attention to works on Russian bureaucracy. In advance of a discussion of bureaucracy in the Russian context[2], it is fair to mention the negative associations that it has, founded not only on everyday experience of interaction with officials, but also reflected in the literary images of Gogol's bribe-taking officials and the insignificant Akaky Akakievich, pointlessly copying papers in his department, or the puffed-up, mercenary officials of Saltykov-Shchedrin, or the absurdity and exhausting waiting that reigned in the Soviet offices described by Zoshchenko and Ilf and Petrov. Often the very word "bureaucracy" is used as a synonym for rudeness, "officialism", "pen-pushing" and "office plankton"[3]. Attempts to understand the world of those we encounter on the other side of the office window or at various levels of administration are as yet far from numerous in the Russian social sciences.

Much research on Russian bureaucratic institutions is embedded in the field of the study of state administration[4], but the officials themselves and life on the other side of the office remain impenetrable. In the discussion of the anthropology of bureaucracy the works that interest us most are those directly connected with an analysis of practices *in situ*, the organisation of bureaucratic establishments and the bureaucrats' own positions with the discretion, moral dilemmas, feelings and the inevitable gap between ideas of the state and reality that they involve.

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1 'Ideology "agitates" or "functions" to the extent of "recruiting" subjects among individuals […] or "transforming" individuals into subjects […] by this very precise operation that we term "interpellation", which may be represented by the most banal type of interpellation on the part of the police (or not) of an everyday kind: "Hey, you over there!" [Tansl. by eds.]

2 In David Graeber's opinion, whereas British people are proud of having a poor grasp of bureaucracy, people who live in Russia consider that they are supposed to be competent in that field and are ashamed if they fail to master all the subtleties of the bureaucratic process [Graeber 2015: 13, 231].

3 On the negative associations of the word "official" in Russian see, for example: [Ipatova 2015; Shmerlina 2015; Vinogradsky 2015].

4 See, for example, the journals *Voprosy gosudarstvennogo i munitsipalnogo upravleniya* [Public Administration Issues], *Gosudarstvennoe i munitsipalnoe upravlenie: uchenye zapiski* [State and Municipal Management: Scholar Notes], and *Vestnik gosudarstvennogo i munitsipalnogo upravleniya* [Journal of Public and Municipal Administration].

The authors of the collection of articles *A Russian Bureaucrat: A Sociological Analysis of the Lifeworld of the State and Municipal Civil Servants*, edited by Dmitry Rogozin, set themselves the task of studying the "living world" of Russian officials, the inter-subjective "correlation of human experience and activity, the everyday world, the immediacy of knowledge, ideas and experiences" [Rogozin 2015a: 6]. These sociologists, philosophers, culturologists, economists and historians aim to study the nature of state service and its value norms using material from interviews with state and municipal employees in six regions of Russia. They study the semiotic field of their language and try to understand whether a liberalisation of power in Russia is possible [Rogozin 2015b], consider the very phenomenon of officialdom [Shmerlina 2015], and analyse the connotations of the word "official" [Ipatova 2015; Shmerlina 2015; Vinogradsky 2015], analyse their "outlook on the world" [Nikulin 2015; Novikov 2015b] and the discourse on corruption [Rogozin 2015c], study "archetypes" [Novikov 2015a], career trajectories [Kurakin 2015] and the peculiarities of the "professional world" [Vinogradsky 2015].

The interviews with municipal officials presented in the book contain interesting and important details which allow us to look through the keyhole into the office. However, as Dmitry Rogozin himself points out, in the articles in the collection (to a large extent because of the chosen research method), the officials remain "strangers", whose norms contradict "the basic values of academic freedom and independence of views" [Rogozin 2015a: 8–9]. Notwithstanding the idea of studying the "lifeworld" of Russian bureaucrats, they appear in the texts "drained of personality, weighed down with office work and the circulation of documents" [Rogozin 2015b: 28], which does not seem much different from the stereotypes to which the authors pay so much attention.

There are also works whose authors are involved to a greater degree in the everyday life of Russian bureaucrats. While studying the everyday life of policemen by means of participant observation and interviews, Ekaterina Khodzhaeva demonstrates the many contradictions that ordinary policemen face: obligations that conflict with each other, a limited toolkit for protecting or assisting the citizens, and the refusal of other state services to co-operate [Khodzhaeva 2013; 2015]. Whereas in the popular imagination policemen in today's Russia enjoy almost unlimited power, research using anthropological methods overthrows the stereotypes and brings the actual practice and logic of ordinary officers closer to understanding. Other researchers have also addressed themselves to the analysis of the everyday life of street-level bureaucrats, and their works shed light on the logic of activity of various state and municipal employees, which usually remains in the shade, and on their ways of coping with the difficulties of their work (see, for

example: [Galindabaeva 2013; Moiseeva 2014; Galkin 2019; Martynenko 2023]).

In her book on complaints addressed to the authorities in Russia from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day, Elena Bogdanova uses the methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis of documents [Bogdanova 2021]. At the same time she uses in-depth interviews both with the bureaucrats who receive the complaints and the people who submit them. As she points out, it is the interviews that helped her to supplement her analysis of the mechanism for submitting complaints with data about the informal rules and strategies that play an exceptional role in the way complaints function at all periods of history [Bogdanova 2021: 14].

Thus, in accordance with the general tendencies of the anthropology of bureaucracy, one direction of research in Russia is centred upon the bureaucratic artefact. The interdisciplinary collection of articles *The Status of the Document: Final Paper or Alienated Evidence?*, edited by Irina Kaspe [Kaspe 2013] is devoted to the special relationship between reality and documents. The authors consider the meaning of "document" and "documentation" from the positions of sociology, anthropology, political science, history, philosophy, cultural and literary studies, and how they function within a culture, how documents are correlated with trust in papers and in the people who produce them.

Albert Baiburin's monograph *The Soviet Passport: The History, Nature, and Uses of the Soviet Passport in the USSR* [Baiburin 2021] is devoted to one of the "personal documents" that connect a person with bureaucratic reality. Using the example of the bureaucratic artefact, the book traces the transformation of the state's view of the person. Paying great attention to historical contexts and analysing the physicality and symbolic significance of the passport and the ritualised practices connected with it, Baiburin shows how the introduction of the passport system confirmed mistrust as one of the principles of the state's attitude to its citizens. He asks how the Soviet passport system functioned in its official and unofficial variants. As Baiburin writes, "the official regulations that issued forth from the higher echelons of power served as material to be interpreted not only by simple Soviet citizens, but also by the representatives of the authorities themselves […] As a result, a wealth of practical experience was stored up which had not been anticipated by official scenarios, but which made it possible for Soviet citizens to attempt to realise their specific strategies for living" [Baiburin 2021: 353]. This logic resonates with Hull and Hetherington's approach to the document as an object that is open to different readings and which offers, despite its seemingly strict formality, a variety of actions.

Konstantin Gaaze deals with another material artefact that is important for Russian bureaucracy, analysing the handwritten note — comments written by hand on documents from the official correspondence of the most senior Russian bureaucrats [Gaaze 2016]. In Gaaze's opinion the so-called resolutions written over the printed text reflect the specifics of Russian governance, where the free, or literally arbitrary form of a highly-placed bureaucrat's answer produces a power independent of the formal rules of the organisation: "Bureaucracy emerges where and when rules begin to regulate not only practice, but also the mode of relation to the matter in hand" [Gaaze 2016: 122]. Using the example of handwritten material, he shows how Russian governance combines features of modern and patrimonial bureaucracy — forms of the state identified by Weber [Weber 1978]. The analysis of specific material artefacts, as in the works by Hull and Ferguson, allows Gaaze to draw conclusions about the political system of the country as a whole.

"On Leviathan's Tail"

On 16–17 December 2022 the European University at St Petersburg hosted a seminar entitled "On Leviathan's Tail: The Anthropology of Bureaucracy in Contemporary Russia". The fact that it took place was due to the growing attention to bureaucratic topics at the university's Faculty of Anthropology and the long-standing interest in research into bureaucracy of colleagues from the Institute for the Rule of Law. We saw the aim of the seminar as the creation of an interdisciplinary platform for the discussion of qualitative research into bureaucracy, during which it might be possible to look behind the veil of state administration, find out what the everyday life of Russian street-level officials in various departments looks like, what difficulties they encounter and how they overcome them (or not). In other words, at the seminar we tried to bring together research on the life and work of those who are at the bottom of the pyramid of power, and on the way ordinary citizens interact with Russian bureaucracy.

Unexpectedly for us, the announcement of the seminar produced a large response from colleagues from different cities, institutions and disciplines. A partial explanation for this reaction may be the fact that David Graeber's works had been recently translated into Russian (but which is cause and which is effect?) or that bureaucracy having become an ineradicable part of life, had obtained the status of a legitimate field for ethnographic research. Besides, the current socio-political context with the opacity of its administrative logic may give rise to a desire to look into the black box, to see why it all works the way it does, or in some cases does not work at all.

The articles in the cluster published here have adopted a variety of approaches to analyse the work of bureaucrats and their clients'

interactions with them. Nikita Shevchenko's article is an example of research into the material side of bureaucracy that clients are obliged to deal with. Analysing the forms filled in by conscripts who have applied to human rights organisations, the author relies on the ideas of Bruno Latour [Latour 1990] and Matthew Hull [Hull 2012b], who call for the rehabilitation of the material artefacts of bureaucracy and science that have not previously been noticed by social scientists. Shevchenko calls attention to the design of the conscripts' forms and how it reflects the logic of the work of the recruiting office and its bureaucratic organisation. Following the "aesthetic" approach to the study of documents [Hull 2012a: 255], i.e. focusing on the internal structure of the body of the form and how it is used, he studies how the medical and social biographies of the conscript are reconstructed within the bureaucracy of conscription. Following Marc Berg (see, for example: [Berg, Bowker 1997]), he places the problem of "documentary time" at the centre of the text, showing how interaction with bureaucracy acquires a biographical dimension. Thereby he locates his research at the intersection between anthropological research into bureaucratic documents and the anthropology of medicine.

The form as a material artefact of bureaucracy also figures in Nikita Mishakov's article. In a text about the employees of an organisation which determines citizens' "need" — whether the state should provide social assistance to them and to what extent — Mishakov indicates the importance of studying the moral and "human" relations that arise outside the rational models for street-level bureaucrats' behaviour. The employees of this department are supposed to determine any particular person's "degree of need" according to the formal data from the form, relying on a clearly prescribed classification. However, decisions are not in fact taken solely through formal procedures. Citing Jens Kjaerulff, who criticises the theory of discretion [Kjaerulff 2020], he remarks: this category is applicable to the model of a rational actor, but it is bad at describing and explaining the other type of behaviour encountered by street-level bureaucrats — behaviour based on a person's own ideas of duty and justice. Thus, in the course of his analysis of interviews Mishakov draws attention to the fact that many employees of the Centre describe practices that are based on confidential relationships both with colleagues (the immediate providers of social services) and with the citizens who come to them for help. Their previous professional experience also plays a part in determining the "degree of need": those bureaucrats with experience of social work amongst the people are more responsive. At the same time, the employees of the Centre are forced to restrain their altruistic impulses for fear of audits. Thus, though he starts with the material side of bureaucracy, Mishakov dedicates his text to another impor-

tant aspect of research into bureaucrats' everyday life: officials' discretion and the place of personal moral and ethical choices in their working practice.

Aleksandra Zakharova's article continues a topic touched on by Mishakov, that of the bureaucratic classification of clients, taking place in a somewhat unusual context, the everyday work of employees of village administrations and members of their governance teams. Zakharova asks why, in a settlement where "everybody knows everybody" (as opposed to an office visited by many clients, between whom limited resources have to be distributed [Lipsky 2010]) village bureaucrats try to determine the particular "character" of settlements. Using James Ferguson's idea of "moral geography" in the discourse of Zambians [Ferguson 1992], she considers the moral cartography of the social space of the village, in the course of which the municipal officials determine which settlements are more "problematic" to manage, thereby reducing the amount of uncertainty that they experience. At the same time, Zakharova shows that the ability to classify, demonstrated in the course of their work, is the mark of "proper" rural administrators. In conditions where there is a lack of autonomy and resources, moral map-making helps officials fully to live up to the role of "master of the territory" that is assigned to them, and to maintain that status. In this way Zakharova's article is in the middle of the range of social science articles on bureaucracy described above, being a study of officials' everyday work on the one hand (as in research into professions and organisations), and also, on the other, an attempt to take account of a particular socio-political context, thus belonging to the field of political anthropology.

The cluster ends with an article by Dmitriy Serebrennikov which analyses the working practices of the employees of the Combined Emergency Response Service, who answer 112 calls.[1] As they accumulate calls about emergencies of all kinds, it is the operators who decide where and how to redirect the calls that they receive, that is, they distribute the tasks among different departments. In the context of research into "screen-level bureaucracy", Serebrennikov's work is counter-intuitive in the very question that it asks: do the operators who answer and redirect the calls have any room for discretion? He shows that even in the context of strict regulation, the 112 service employees have a certain space to act as they see fit. Informal connections with other services — the fire brigade, the police and the ambulance service — help them to transfer a request more quickly and see how particular problems are solved. This

[1] 112 is the international emergency number, which coexists with national emergency service numbers (such as 999 in the United Kingdom, 911 in the USA). In Russia it operates alongside the traditional numbers for the various emergency services (101, 102, 103, 104). [Transl.]

substantially expands discretion in a profession where it might appear impossible to the outside observer.

This article cluster is a first attempt to bring together works that are different in many respects, though all situated in the interdisciplinary field of the anthropological study of bureaucracy, and at the same time to define and bring to attention the field itself within Russian social research. One would like to believe that it will not be the last such attempt.

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Translated by Ralph Cleminson