

**Also by David Graeber**

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# **The Utopia of Rules**

**On Technology, Stupidity, and the**

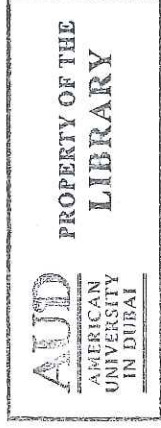
**Secret Joys of Bureaucracy**

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## **David Graeber**

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referred to the new document as the “dompas,” or “stupid pass,” for precisely that reason.

Andrew Mathews’s brilliant ethnography of the Mexican forestry service in Oaxaca likewise demonstrates that it is precisely the near-total inequality of power between government officials and local farmers that allows foresters to remain in a kind of ideological bubble, maintaining simple black-and-white ideas about forest fires (for instance) that allow them to remain pretty much the only people in Oaxaca who don’t understand what effects their regulations actually have.<sup>54</sup>

There are traces of the link between coercion and absurdity even in the way we talk about bureaucracy in English: note for example, how most of the colloquial terms that specifically refer to bureaucratic foolishness—SNAFU, Catch-22, and the like—derive from military slang. More generally, political scientists have long observed a “negative correlation,” as David Apter put it,<sup>55</sup> between coercion and information: that is, while relatively democratic regimes tend to be awash in too much information, as everyone bombards political authorities with explanations and demands, the more authoritarian and repressive a regime, the less reason people have to tell it anything—which is why such regimes are forced to rely so heavily on spies, intelligence agencies, and secret police.

Violence’s capacity to allow arbitrary decisions, and thus to avoid the kind of debate, clarification, and renegotiation typical of more egalitarian social relations, is obviously what allows its victims to see procedures created on the basis of violence as stupid or unreasonable. Most of us are capable of getting a superficial sense of what others are thinking or feeling just by observing their tone of voice, or body language—it’s usually not hard to get a sense of people’s immediate intentions and motives, but going beyond that superficial often takes a great

deal of work. Much of the everyday business of social life, in fact, consists in trying to decipher others’ motives and perceptions. Let us call this “interpretive labor.” One might say, those relying on the fear of force are not obliged to engage in a lot of interpretive labor, and thus, generally speaking, they do not.

As an anthropologist, I know I am treading perilous ground here. When they do turn their attention to violence, anthropologists tend to emphasize exactly the opposite aspect: the ways that acts of violence are meaningful and communicative—even the ways that they can resemble poetry.<sup>56</sup> Anyone suggesting otherwise is likely to be instantly accused of a kind of philistinism: “are you honestly suggesting that violence is *not* symbolically powerful, that bullets and bombs are *not* meant to communicate something?” So for the record: no, I’m not suggesting that. But I am suggesting that this might not be the most important question. First of all, because it assumes that “violence” refers primarily to *acts* of violence—actual shovings, punchings, stabbings, or explosions—rather than to the *threat* of violence, and the kinds of social relations the pervasive threat of violence makes possible.<sup>57</sup> Second of all, because this seems to be one area where anthropologists, and academics more generally, are particularly prone to fall victim to the confusion of interpretive depth and social significance. That is, they automatically assume that what is most interesting about violence is also what’s most important.

Let me take these points one at a time. Is it accurate to say that acts of violence are, generally speaking, also acts of communication? It certainly is. But this is true of pretty much any form of human action. It strikes me that what is really important about violence is that it is perhaps the only form of human action that holds out even the possibility of having social effects *without* being communicative. To be more precise: violence may well be the only way it is possible for one human being to do something which will have relatively predictable effects on the

actions of a person about whom they understand nothing. In pretty much any other way in which you might try to influence another's actions, you must at least have some idea about who you think they are, who they think you are, what they might want out of the situation, their aversions and proclivities, and so forth. Hit them over the head hard enough, and all of this becomes irrelevant.

It is true that the effects one can have by disabling or killing someone are very limited. But they are real enough—and critically, it is possible to know in advance exactly what they are going to be. Any alternative form of action cannot, without some sort of appeal to shared meanings or understandings, have any predictable effects at all. What's more, while attempts to influence others by the threat of violence do require some level of shared understandings, these can be pretty minimal. Most human relations—particularly ongoing ones, whether between longstanding friends or longstanding enemies—are extremely complicated, dense with history and meaning. Maintaining them requires a constant and often subtle work of imagination, of endlessly trying to see the world from others' points of view. This is what I've already referred to as "interpretive labor." Threatening others with physical harm allows the possibility of cutting through all this. It makes possible relations of a far more simple and schematic kind ("cross this line and I will shoot you," "one more word out of any of you and you're going to jail"). This is of course why violence is so often the preferred weapon of the stupid. One might even call it the trump card of the stupid, since (and this is surely one of the tragedies of human existence) it is the one form of stupidity to which it is most difficult to come up with an intelligent response.

I do need to introduce one crucial qualification here. Everything, here, depends on the balance of forces. If two parties are engaged in a relatively equal contest of violence—say, generals commanding opposing armies—they have good reason to try

to get inside each other's heads. It is only when one side has an overwhelming advantage in their capacity to cause physical harm that they no longer need to do so. But this has very profound effects, because it means that the most characteristic effect of violence, its ability to obviate the need for "interpretive labor," becomes most salient when the violence itself is least visible—in fact, where acts of spectacular physical violence are least likely to occur. These are of course precisely what I have just defined as situations of structural violence, systematic inequalities ultimately backed up by the threat of force. For this reason, situations of structural violence invariably produce extreme lopsided structures of imaginative identification.

These effects are often most visible when the structures of inequality take the most deeply internalized forms. Gender is again a classic case in point. For example, in American situation comedies of the 1950s, there was a constant staple: jokes about the impossibility of understanding women. The jokes (told, of course, by men) always represented women's logic as fundamentally alien and incomprehensible. "You have to love them," the message always seemed to run, "but who can really understand how these creatures think?" One never had the impression the women in question had any trouble understanding men. The reason is obvious. Women had no choice but to understand men. In America, the fifties were the heyday of a certain ideal of the one-income patriarchal family, and among the more affluent, the ideal was often achieved. Women with no access to their own income or resources obviously had no choice but to spend a great deal of time and energy understanding what their menfolk thought was going on.<sup>58</sup>

This kind of rhetoric about the mysteries of womankind appears to be a perennial feature of such patriarchal arrangements. It is usually paired with a sense that, though illogical and inexplicable, women still have access to mysterious, almost mystical wisdom ("women's intuition") unavailable to men. And of

course something like this happens in any relation of extreme inequality: peasants, for example, are always represented as being both oafishly simple, but somehow, also, mystically wise. Generations of women novelists—Virginia Woolf comes most immediately to mind (*To the Lighthouse*)—have documented the other side of such arrangements: the constant efforts women end up having to expend in managing, maintaining, and adjusting the egos of oblivious and self-important men, involving the continual work of imaginative identification, or interpretive labor. This work carries over on every level. Women everywhere are always expected to continually imagine what one situation or another would look like from a male point of view. Men are almost never expected to do the same for women. So deeply internalized is this pattern of behavior that many men react to any suggestion that they might do otherwise as if it were itself an act of violence. A popular exercise among high school creative writing teachers in America, for example, is to ask students to imagine they have been transformed, for a day, into someone of the opposite sex, and describe what that day might be like. The results, apparently, are uncannily uniform. The girls all write long and detailed essays that clearly show they have spent a great deal of time thinking about the subject. Usually, a good proportion of the boys refuse to write the essay entirely. Those who do make it clear they have not the slightest conception what being a teenage girl might be like, and are outraged at the suggestion that they should have to think about it.<sup>59</sup>

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

Although there has never been any official body of black people in the United States who have gathered

as anthropologists and/or ethnographers to study whiteness, black folks have, from slavery on, shared in conversations with one another “special” knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. Deemed special because it is not a way of knowing that has been recorded fully in written material, its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society. For years black domestic servants, working in white homes, acted as informants who brought knowledge back to segregated communities—details, facts, psychoanalytic readings of the white “Other.”<sup>60</sup>

If there is a limitation in the feminist literature, I would say, it’s that it can be if anything a tad too generous, tending to emphasize the insights of the oppressed over the blindness or foolishness of their oppressors.<sup>61</sup>

Could it be possible to develop a general theory of interpretive labor? We’d probably have to begin by recognizing that there are two critical elements here that, while linked, need to be formally distinguished. The first is the process of imaginative identification as a form of knowledge, the fact that within relations of domination, it is generally the subordinates who are effectively relegated the work of understanding how the social relations in question really work. Anyone who has ever worked in a restaurant kitchen, for example, knows that if something goes terribly wrong and an angry boss appears to size things up, he is unlikely to carry out a detailed investigation, or even to pay serious attention to the workers all scrambling to explain their version of what happened. He is much more likely to tell them all to shut up and arbitrarily impose a story that allows instant judgment: i.e., “you, Joe, you wouldn’t have made a mistake like that; you, Mark, you’re the new guy, you must have screwed up—if you do it again, you’re fired.” It’s those who do

not have the power to hire and fire who are left with the work of figuring out what actually did go wrong so as to make sure it doesn't happen again. The same thing usually happens with ongoing relations: everyone knows that servants tend to know a great deal about their employers' families, but the opposite almost never occurs.

The second element is the resultant pattern of sympathetic identification. Curiously, it was Adam Smith, in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, who first observed the phenomenon we now refer to as "compassion fatigue." Human beings, he proposed, are normally inclined not only to imaginatively identify with their fellows, but as a result, to spontaneously feel one another's joys and sorrows. The poor, however, are so consistently miserable that otherwise sympathetic observers are simply overwhelmed, and are forced, without realizing it, to blot out their existence entirely. The result is that while those on the bottom of a social ladder spend a great deal of time imagining the perspectives of, and genuinely caring about, those on the top, it almost never happens the other way around.

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

At this point I can return to the question of bureaucracy.

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

to police officers. I say "euphemistically," because generations of police sociologists have pointed out that only a very small proportion of what police actually do has anything to do with enforcing criminal law—or with criminal matters of any kind. Most of it has to do with regulations, or, to put it slightly more technically, with the scientific application of physical force, or the threat of physical force, to aid in the resolution of administrative problems.<sup>62</sup> In other words they spend most of their time enforcing all those endless rules and regulations about who can buy or smoke or sell or build or eat or drink what where that don't exist in places like small-town or rural Madagascar.

So: Police are bureaucrats with weapons.

If you think about it, this is a really ingenious trick. Because when most of us think about police, we do not think of them as enforcing regulations. We think of them as fighting crime, and when we think of "crime," the kind of crime we have in our minds is violent crime.<sup>63</sup> Even though, in fact, what police mostly do is exactly the opposite: they bring the threat of force to bear on situations that would otherwise have nothing to do with it. I find this all the time in public discussions. When trying to come up with a hypothetical example of a situation in which police are likely to be involved, people will almost invariably think of some act of interpersonal violence: a mugging or assault. But even a moment's reflection should make it clear that, when most real acts of physical assault do occur, even in major cities like Marseille or Montevideo or Minneapolis—domestic violence, gang fights, drunken brawls—the police do not get involved. Police are only likely to be called in if someone dies, or is so seriously hurt they end up in the hospital. But this is because the moment an ambulance is involved, there is also paperwork; if someone is treated in the hospital, there has to be a cause of injury, the circumstances become relevant, police reports have to be filed. And if someone dies there are all sorts of forms, up to and including municipal statistics. So the only fights which police are sure to get involved in are those

that generate some kind of paperwork. The vast majority of muggings or burglaries aren't reported either, unless there are insurance forms to be filled out, or lost documents that need to be replaced, and which can only be replaced if one files a proper police report. So most violent crime does not end up involving the police.

On the other hand, try driving down the street of any one of those cities in a car without license plates. We all know what's going to happen. Uniformed officers armed with sticks, guns, and/or tasers will appear on the scene almost immediately, and if you simply refuse to comply with their instructions, violent force will, most definitely, be applied.

Why are we so confused about what police really do? The obvious reason is that in the popular culture of the last fifty years or so, police have become almost obsessive objects of imaginative identification in popular culture. It has come to the point that it's not at all unusual for a citizen in a contemporary industrialized democracy to spend several hours a day reading books, watching movies, or viewing TV shows that invite them to look at the world from a police point of view, and to vicariously participate in their exploits. And these imaginary police do, indeed, spend almost all of their time fighting violent crime, or dealing with its consequences.

If nothing else, all this throws an odd wrinkle into Weber's famous worries about the iron cage: the danger that modern society will become so well organized by faceless technocrats that charismatic heroes, enchantment, and romance will completely disappear.<sup>64</sup> Actually, as it turns out, bureaucratic society does indeed have a tendency to produce its own, unique forms of charismatic hero. These have, since the late nineteenth century, arrived in the form of an endless assortment of mythic detectives, police officers, and spies—all, significantly, figures whose job is to operate precisely where bureaucratic structures for ordering information encounter the actual application of physical violence. Bureaucracy, after all, has been around for

thousands of years, and bureaucratic societies, from Sumer and Egypt, to Imperial China, have produced great literature. But modern North Atlantic societies are the very first to have created genres of literature where the heroes themselves are bureaucrats, or operate entirely within bureaucratic environments.<sup>65</sup>

It strikes me that contemplating the role of the police in our society actually allows us some interesting insights into social theory. Now, I must admit that over the course of this essay I have not been especially kind to academics and most of their theoretical habits and predilections. I wouldn't be surprised if some were inclined to read what I've written as an argument that social theory is largely pointless—the self-important fantasies of a cloistered elite who refuse to accept the simple realities of power. But this is not what I'm arguing at all. This essay is itself an exercise in social theory, and if I didn't think such exercises had the potential to throw important light on areas that would otherwise remain obscure, I would not have written it. The question is what kind, and to what purpose.

Here a comparison of bureaucratic knowledge and theoretical knowledge is revealing. Bureaucratic knowledge is all about schematization. In practice, bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae. Whether it's a matter of forms, rules, statistics, or questionnaires, it is always a matter of simplification. Typically, it's not very different from the boss who walks into the kitchen to make arbitrary snap decisions as to what went wrong: in either case it is a matter of applying very simple pre-existing templates to complex and often ambiguous situations. The result often leaves those forced to deal with bureaucratic administration with the impression that they are dealing with people who have for some arbitrary reason decided to put on a set of glasses that only allows them to see only 2 percent of what's in front of them. But surely, something very similar happens in social

theory as well. Anthropologists like to describe what they do as "thick description," but in fact an ethnographic description, even a very good one, captures at best 2 percent of what's happening in any particular Nuer feud or Balinese cockfight. A theoretical work that draws on ethnographic descriptions will typically focus on only a tiny part of *that*, plucking perhaps one or two strands out of an endlessly complex fabric of human circumstance, and using them as the basis on which to make generalizations: say, about the dynamics of social conflict, the nature of performance, or the principle of hierarchy.

I am not trying to say there's anything wrong in this kind of theoretical reduction. To the contrary, I am convinced some such process is necessary if one wishes to say something dramatically new about the world.

Consider the role of structural analysis, of the sort that in the sixties and seventies was made famous by anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss, or classicists like Paul Vernant. Academic fashion being what it is, structural analysis is currently considered definitively passé, and most anthropology students find Claude Lévi-Strauss's entire corpus vaguely ridiculous. This strikes me as unfortunate. Certainly insofar as Structuralism claimed to be a single, grandiose theory of the nature of thought, language, and society, providing the key to unlocking all the mysteries of human culture, it was indeed ridiculous and has been justifiably abandoned. But structural analysis wasn't a theory, it was a technique, and to toss that too out the window, as has largely been done, robs us of one of our most ingenious tools. Because the great merit of structural analysis is that it provides a well-nigh foolproof technique for doing what any good theory should do: simplifying and schematizing complex material in such a way as to be able to say something unexpected. This is incidentally how I came up with the point about Weber and heroes of bureaucracy a few paragraphs above. It all came from an experiment demonstrating structural analysis to students at a seminar at Yale.

The basic principle of structural analysis, I was explaining, is that the terms of a symbolic system do not stand in isolation—they are not to be thought of in terms of what they "stand for," but are defined by their relations to each other. One has to first define the field, and then look for elements in that field that are systematic inversions of each other. Take vampires. First you place them: vampires are stock figures in American horror movies. American horror movies constitute a kind of cosmology, a universe unto themselves. Then you ask: what, within this cosmos, is the opposite of a vampire? The answer is obvious. The opposite of a vampire is a werewolf. On one level they are the same: they are both monsters that can bite you and by biting you, turn you, too, into one of their own kind. In most other ways each is an exact inversion of the other. Vampires are rich. They are typically aristocrats. Werewolves are always poor. Vampires are fixed in space: they have castles or crypts that they have to retreat to during the daytime; werewolves are usually homeless derelicts, travelers, or otherwise on the run. Vampires control other creatures (bats, wolves, humans that they hypnotize or render thralls.) Werewolves can't control themselves. Yet—and this is really the clincher in this case—each can be destroyed only by its own negation: vampires, by a stake, a simple sharpened stick that peasants use to construct fences; werewolves, by a silver bullet, something literally made from money.

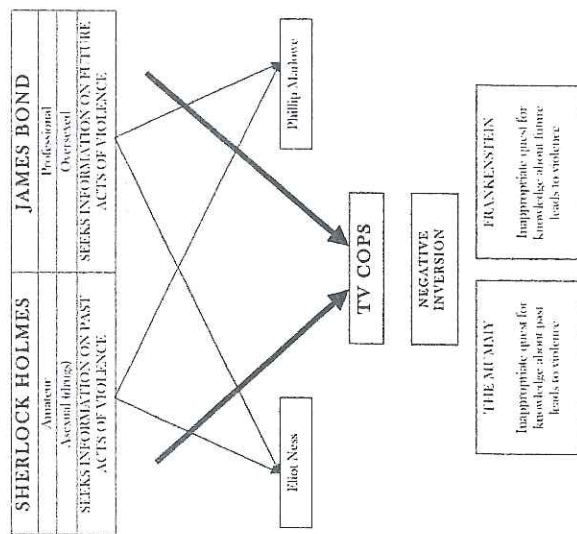
By observing these axes of inversion, we can get a sense of what such symbols are really about: that vampires, for instance, are not necessarily so much about death, or fear, but about power; about the simultaneous feelings of attraction and repulsion that relations of domination tend to create.

Obviously this is an extremely simple example. What I've described is just the initial move, there's a whole series of more sophisticated ones that normally follow: inversions within inversions, mediating terms, levels of hierarchical encompassment. . . . There's no need to go into any of that here. My point

is just that even by making this initial move, one will almost invariably discover something one would not have thought of otherwise. It's a way of radically simplifying reality that leads to insights one would almost certainly never have achieved if one had simply attempted to take on the world in its full complexity.

I often used that example when explaining structural analysis to students. Students always liked it. One time, I suggested we try collectively try our hands at another analysis, of a similar pop culture figure, and someone suggested James Bond.

This made sense to me: James Bond is clearly a mythical figure of some kind. But who was his mythic opposite? The answer soon became obvious. James Bond was the structural inversion of Sherlock Holmes. Both are London-based crime-fighters, and both permanent adolescents after their own fashion, even mild sociopaths, but otherwise, they are opposites in almost every way:



Where Holmes is asexual but fond of cocaine and opium, Bond is oversexed, but uninterested in drugs except for liquor. Holmes is an amateur. Bond is the quintessential professional—he seems to have no life outside his work. Yet Holmes is an amateur who is almost preternaturally disciplined and competent, far more than the professionals at Scotland Yard, while Bond is a professional who is always allowing himself to become distracted, blowing his cover, getting captured, or disobeying direct orders from his boss.<sup>66</sup>

All this, though, really just sets up the key inversion, which is in terms of what they actually do: Sherlock Holmes seeks information about past acts of violence inside his country, while James Bond seeks information about future acts of violence outside it.

It was in mapping out the field that I came to realize that everything here was organized, precisely, around the relation between information and violence—and that Sherlock Holmes and James Bond are, between them, the quintessential charismatic heroes of bureaucracy. The classic TV cop, or hero of any of the literally hundreds of “maverick-cop-who-breaks-all-the-rules” movies that Hollywood has trundled out since the 1960s, is clearly a kind of synthesis of these two figures: crime-fighters who exist within, but are constantly bursting out, of the bureaucratic order, which is nonetheless their entire meaning and existence.<sup>67</sup>

One might object that all this is a simplification of a much richer, more complex and nuanced, tradition of popular culture. Of course it is. That's the whole point. Structural analysis of this sort makes a virtue of simplification. For my own part, I see Lévi-Strauss as a kind of heroic figure too, a man with the sheer intellectual courage to pursue a few simple principles as far as they would go, no matter how apparently absurd or just plain

wrong the results could sometimes be (the story of Oedipus is really about eyes and feet; all social organizations are simply systems for the exchange of women)—or, if you prefer, how much violence he thus did to reality. Because it's a productive violence. And nobody actually gets hurt.

As long as one remains within the domain of theory, then, I would argue that simplification is not necessarily a form of stupidity—it can be a form of intelligence. Even of brilliance. The problems arise at the moment that violence is no longer metaphorical. Here let me turn from imaginary cops to real ones. Jim Cooper, a former LAPD officer turned sociologist,<sup>68</sup> has observed that the overwhelming majority of those who end up getting beaten or otherwise brutalized by police turn out to be innocent of any crime. "Cops don't beat up burglars," he writes. The reason, he explained, is simple: the one thing most guaranteed to provoke a violent reaction from police is a challenge to their right to, as he puts it, "define the situation." That is, to say "no, this isn't a possible crime situation, this is a citizen-who-pays-your-salary-walking-his-dog situation, so shove off," let alone the invariably disastrous, "wait, why are you handcuffing that guy? He didn't do anything!" It's "talking back" above all that inspires beat-downs, and that means challenging whatever administrative rubric (an orderly or a disorderly crowd? A properly or improperly registered vehicle?) has been applied by the officer's discretionary judgment. The police truncheon is precisely the point where the state's bureaucratic imperative for imposing simple administrative schema and its monopoly on coercive force come together. It only makes sense then that bureaucratic violence should consist first and foremost of attacks on those who insist on alternative schemas or interpretations. At the same time, if one accepts Jean Piaget's famous definition of mature intelligence as the ability to coordinate between multiple perspectives (or possible perspectives) one can see, here, precisely how bureaucratic power, at

the moment it turns to violence, becomes literally a form of infantile stupidity.

This analysis, too, is no doubt a simplification, but it's a productive one. Let me try to demonstrate this by applying some of these insights to understanding the type of politics that can emerge within a fundamentally bureaucratic society.

One of the central arguments of this essay so far is that structural violence creates lopsided structures of the imagination. Those on the bottom of the heap have to spend a great deal of imaginative energy trying to understand the social dynamics that surround them—including having to imagine the perspectives of those on top—while the latter can wander about largely oblivious to much of what is going on around them. That is, the powerless not only end up doing most of the actual, physical labor required to keep society running, they also do most of the interpretive labor as well.

This much seems to be the case wherever one encounters systematic inequality. It was just as true in ancient India or medieval China as it is anywhere today. And it will, presumably, remain true so long as structural inequalities endure. However, our own bureaucratic civilization introduces a further element. Bureaucracies, I've suggested, are not themselves forms of stupidity so much as they are ways of organizing stupidity—of managing relationships that are already characterized by extremely unequal structures of imagination, which exist because of the existence of structural violence. This is why even if a bureaucracy is created for entirely benevolent reasons, it will still produce absurdities. And this, in turn, is why I began the essay the way I did. I have no reason to believe anyone involved in my mother's power of attorney drama (even the bank manager) was anything other than well-intentioned. Yet an absurd and apparently endless run-around nonetheless ensued.

Why does this happen? Because even the most benevolent bureaucracies are really just taking the highly schematized, minimal, blinkered perspectives typical of the powerful, turning them into ways of limiting that power or ameliorating its most pernicious effects. Surely, bureaucratic interventions along these lines have done an enormous amount of good in the world. The European social welfare state, with its free education and universal health care, can justly be considered—as Pierre Bourdieu once remarked—one of the greatest achievements of human civilization. But at the same time, in taking forms of willful blindness typical of the powerful and giving them the prestige of science—for instance, by adopting a whole series of assumptions about the meaning of work, family, neighborhood, knowledge, health, happiness, or success that had almost nothing to do with the way poor or working-class people actually lived their lives, let alone what they found meaningful in them—it set itself up for a fall. And fall it did. It was precisely the uneasiness this blindness created even in the minds of its greatest beneficiaries that allowed the Right to mobilize popular support for the policies that have gutted and devastated even the most successful of these programs since the eighties.

And how was this uneasiness expressed? Largely, by the feeling that bureaucratic authority, by its very nature, represented a kind of war against the human imagination. This becomes particularly clear if we look at the youth rebellions from China to Mexico to New York that culminated in the insurrection of May 1968 in Paris. All were rebellions first and foremost against bureaucratic authority; all saw bureaucratic authority as fundamentally stifling of the human spirit, of creativity, conviviality, imagination. The famous slogan “All power to the imagination,” painted on the walls of the Sorbonne, has haunted us ever since—endlessly repeated on posters, buttons, flyers, manifestos, films, and song lyrics, largely because it seems to embody

something fundamental, not just to the spirit of sixties rebellion, but to the very essence of what we have come to call “the Left.”

This is important. Actually it could not be more important. Because I think what happened in '68 reveals a contradiction at the very core of Leftist thought, from its very inception—a contradiction that only fully revealed itself at precisely the high-water mark of its historical success. In the introduction to this volume, I suggested that the contemporary Left suffers from the lack of a coherent critique of bureaucracy. But if you really go back to the beginnings—to the idea that emerged around the time of the French Revolution that the political spectrum can be divided into a right- and left-wing in the first place—it becomes clear that the Left, in its essence, is a critique of bureaucracy, even if it's one that has, again and again, been forced to accommodate itself in practice to the very bureaucratic structures and mindset it originally arose to oppose.<sup>69</sup>

In this sense, the Left's current inability to formulate a critique of bureaucracy that actually speaks to its erstwhile constituents is synonymous with the decline of the Left itself. Without such a critique, radical thought loses its vital center—it collapses into a fragmented scatter of protests and demands.

It seems that every time the Left decides to take a safe, “realistic” course, it just digs itself deeper. To understand how this happened, let alone what we might be able to do about it, I think it will be necessary to reexamine some very basic assumptions: first and foremost, about what it means to say one is being “realistic” to begin with.

***Be realistic: demand the impossible.***  
(another '68 slogan)

So far, I have been discussing how structural violence creates lopsided structures of the imagination and how bureaucracy

becomes a way of managing such situations—and the forms of structural blindness and stupidity they inevitably entail. Even at their best, bureaucratic procedures are ways to turn stupidity, as it were, against itself.

Why do movements challenging such structures so often end up creating bureaucracies instead? Normally, they do so as a kind of compromise. One must be realistic and not demand too much. Welfare state reforms seem more realistic than demanding a broad distribution of property; a “transitional” stage of state socialism seems more realistic than jumping immediately to giving power to democratically organized workers’ councils, and so forth. But this raises another question. When we speak of being “realistic,” exactly what reality is it we are referring to?

Here, I think an anecdote about an activist group I was once involved with might prove instructive.

From early 2000 to late 2002, I was working with the New York Direct Action Network—the principal group responsible for organizing mass actions as part of the global justice movement in New York City at that time. I call it a “group,” but technically DAN was not a group at all but a decentralized network, operating on principles of direct democracy according to an elaborate, but quite effective, form of consensus process. It played a central role in ongoing efforts to create new organizational forms. DAN existed in a purely political space. It had no concrete resources—not even a significant treasury—to administer.

Then one day someone gave DAN a car.

The DAN car caused a minor, but ongoing, crisis. We soon discovered that legally, it is impossible for a decentralized network to own a car. Cars can be owned by individuals, or they can be owned by corporations (which are fictive individuals), or by governments. But they cannot be owned by networks. Unless we were willing to incorporate ourselves as a non-profit corporation (which would have required a complete

reorganization and an abandonment of most of our egalitarian principles) the only expedient was to find a volunteer willing to claim to be the legal owner. But then that person was held responsible for all outstanding fines and insurance fees, and had to provide written permission to allow anyone else to drive the car out of state. And, of course, only he could retrieve the car if it were impounded. One courageous activist did agree to undertake the responsibility, but as a result, weekly meetings were overwhelmed by reportbacks about his latest legal problems. Before long the DAN car had become such an endless source of tribulation that we decided to organize a fundraiser, throwing a big party where we provided a sledgehammer to anyone willing to pay five dollars to take a whack at the thing.

It struck me there was something profound to this story. Why is it that projects like DAN’s—projects aimed at democratizing society—are so often perceived as idle dreams that melt away as soon as they encounter hard material reality? In our case, at least, it had nothing to do with inefficiency: police chiefs across the country had called us the best organized force they’d ever had to deal with. It seems to me that the reality effect (if one may call it that) comes rather from the fact that radical projects tend to founder—or at least become endlessly difficult—the moment they enter into the world of large, heavy objects: buildings, cars, tractors, boats, industrial machinery. This in turn is not because these objects are somehow intrinsically difficult to administer democratically—history is full of communities that successfully engage in the democratic administration of common resources—it’s because, like the DAN car, they are surrounded by endless government regulation, and are effectively impossible to hide from the government’s armed representatives. In America, I have seen endless examples of this dilemma. A squat is legalized after a long struggle; suddenly, building inspectors arrive to announce it will take ten thousand dollars’ worth of repairs to bring it up to code. Organizers are

therefore forced to spend the next several years organizing bake sales and soliciting contributions. This means setting up bank accounts, which means, in turn, adhering to legal regulations that specify how any group receiving funds, or dealing with the government, must be organized (again, *not* as an egalitarian collective). All these regulations are enforced by violence. True, in ordinary life, police rarely come in swinging billy clubs to enforce building code regulations, but, as anarchists often are often uniquely positioned to find out, if one simply pretends the state and its regulations don't exist, this will, eventually, happen. The rarity with which the nightsticks actually appear just helps to make the violence harder to see. This in turn makes the effects of all these regulations—regulations that almost always assume that normal relations between individuals are mediated by the market, and that normal groups are organized internally by relations of hierarchy and command—seem to emanate not from the government's monopoly of the use of force, but from the largeness, solidity, and heaviness of the objects themselves.

When one is asked to be "realistic," then, the reality one is normally being asked to recognize is not one of natural, material facts, nor some supposed ugly truth about human nature. Being "realistic" usually means taking seriously the effects of the systematic threat of violence. This possibility even threads our language. Why, for example, is a building referred to as "real property," or "real estate"? The "real" in this usage is not derived from Latin *res*, or "thing": it's from the Spanish *real*, meaning, "royal," "belonging to the king." All land within a sovereign territory ultimately belongs to the sovereign—legally this is still the case. This is why the state has the right to impose its regulations. But sovereignty ultimately comes down to a monopoly on what is euphemistically referred to as "force"—that is, violence. Just as the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben argued that from the perspective of sovereign power, something is alive

because you can kill it, so property is "real" because the state can seize or destroy it.

In the same way, when one takes a "realist" position in International Relations, one assumes that states will use whatever capacities they have at their disposal, including force of arms, to pursue their national interests. What "reality" is one recognizing? Certainly not material reality. The idea that nations are human-like entities with purposes and interests is purely metaphysical. The King of France had purposes and interests. "France" does not. What makes it seem "realistic" to suggest it does is simply that those in control of nation-states have the power to raise armies, launch invasions, and bomb cities, and can otherwise threaten the use of organized violence in the name of what they describe as their "national interests"—and that it would be foolish to ignore that possibility. National interests are real because they can kill you.

The critical term here is "force," as in "the state's monopoly on the use of coercive force." Whenever we hear this word invoked, we find ourselves in the presence of a political ontology in which the power to destroy, to cause others pain or to threaten to break, damage, or mangle others' bodies (or just lock them in a tiny room for the rest of their lives) is treated as the social equivalent of the very energy that drives the cosmos. Contemplate, if you will, the metaphors and displacements that make it possible to construct the following two sentences:

Scientists investigate the nature of physical laws so as to understand the forces that govern the universe.

Police are experts in the scientific application of physical force in order to enforce the laws that govern society.

This is to my mind the essence of right-wing thought: a political ontology that through such subtle means allows

violence to define the very parameters of social existence and common sense.<sup>70</sup>

This is why I say that the Left has always been, in its essential inspiration, antibureaucratic. Because it has always been founded on a different set of assumptions about what is ultimately real—that is, about the very grounds of political being. Obviously Leftists don't deny the reality of violence. Many Leftist theorists think about it quite a lot. But they don't tend to give it the same foundational status. Instead, I would argue that Leftist thought is founded on what I will call a "political ontology of the imagination" (though it could also, perhaps just as well, have been called an ontology of creativity or making or invention.) Nowadays, most of us tend to identify this tendency with the legacy of Marx, with his emphasis on social revolution and forces of material production. Marx was ultimately only a man of his time, and his terms emerged from much wider arguments about value, labor, and creativity current in radical circles of his day, whether in the workers' movement, or for that matter in various strains of Romanticism and bohemian life emerging around him in Paris and London at the time. Marx himself, for all his contempt for the utopian Socialists of his day, never ceased to insist that what makes human beings different from animals is that architects, unlike bees, first raise their structures in the imagination. It was the unique property of humans, for Marx, that they first envision things, and only then bring them into being. It was this process he referred to as "production."

Around the same time, utopian Socialists like St. Simon were arguing that artists needed to become the *avant-garde* or "vanguard," as he put it, of a new social order, providing the grand visions that industry now had the power to bring into being. What at the time might have seemed the fantasy of an eccentric pamphleteer soon became the charter for a sporadic, uncertain, but apparently permanent alliance that endures to this day. If

artistic avant-gardes and social revolutionaries have felt a peculiar affinity for one another ever since, borrowing each other's languages and ideas, it appears to have been insofar as both have remained committed to the idea that the ultimate, hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently. In this sense, a phrase like "all power to the imagination" expresses the very quintessence of the Left.

From a left perspective, then, the hidden reality of human life is the fact that the world doesn't just happen. It isn't a natural fact, even though we tend to treat it as if it is—it exists because we all collectively produce it. We imagine things we'd like and then we bring them into being. But the moment you think about it in these terms, it's obvious that something has gone terribly wrong. Since who, if they could simply imagine any world that they liked and then bring it into being, would create a world like this one?<sup>71</sup> Perhaps the leftist sensibility was expressed in its purest form in the words of Marxist philosopher John Holloway, who once wanted to title a book, "Stop Making Capitalism."<sup>72</sup> Capitalism, he noted, is not something imposed on us by some outside force. It only exists because every day we wake up and continue to produce it. If we woke up one morning and all collectively decided to produce something else, then we wouldn't have capitalism anymore. This is the ultimate revolutionary question: what are the conditions that would have to exist to enable us to do this—to just wake up and imagine and produce something else?

To this emphasis on forces of creativity and production, the Right tends to reply that revolutionaries systematically neglect the social and historical importance of the "means of destruction": states, armies, executioners, barbarian invasions, criminals, unruly mobs, and so on. Pretending such things are not there, or can simply be wished away, they argue, has the result of ensuring that left-wing regimes will in fact create far more death and

destruction than those that have the wisdom to take a more "realistic" approach.

Obviously, this is something of a simplification, and one could make endless qualifications. The bourgeoisie of Marx's time, for instance, had an extremely productivist philosophy—one reason Marx could see it as a revolutionary force. Elements of the Right dabbled with the artistic ideal, and twentieth-century Marxist regimes often embraced essentially right-wing theories of power and paid little more than lip service to the determinant nature of production. On the other hand, in their obsession with jailing poets and playwrights whose work they considered threatening, they evinced a profound faith in the power of art and creativity to change the world—those running capitalist regimes rarely bothered, convinced that if they kept a firm hand on the means of productions (and, of course, the army and police), the rest would take care of itself.

One of the reasons it is difficult to see all this is because the word "imagination" can mean so many different things. In most modern definitions imagination is counterposed to reality; "imaginary" things are first and foremost things that aren't really there. This can cause a great deal of confusion when we speak of imagination in the abstract, because it makes it seem like imagination has much more to do with Spenser's *Faerie Queene* than with a group of waitresses trying to figure out how to placate the couple at Table 7 before the boss shows up.

Still, this way of thinking about imagination is relatively new, and continues to coexist with much older ones. In the common Ancient and Medieval conception, for example, what we now call "the imagination" was not seen as opposed to reality per se, but as a kind of middle ground, a zone of passage connecting material reality and the rational soul. This was especially

true for those who saw Reason as essentially an aspect of God, who felt that thought therefore partook in a divinity which in no way partook of—indeed, was absolutely alien to—material reality. (This became the dominant position in the Christian Middle Ages.) How, then, was it possible for the rational mind to receive sense impressions from nature?

The solution was to propose an intermediary substance, made out of the same material as the stars, the "pneuma," a kind of circulatory system through which perceptions of the material world could pass, becoming emotionally charged in the process and mixing with all sorts of phantasms, before the rational mind could grasp their significance. Intentions and desires moved in the opposite direction, circulating through the imagination before they could be realized in the world. It's only after Descartes, really, that the word "imaginary" came to mean, specifically, anything that is not real: imaginary creatures, imaginary places (Narnia, planets in faraway galaxies, the Kingdom of Prester John), imaginary friends. By this definition, a "political ontology of the imagination" could only be a contradiction in terms. The imagination cannot be the basis of reality. It is by definition that which we can think, but which has no reality.

I'll refer to this latter as "the transcendent notion of the imagination" since it seems to take as its model novels or other works of fiction that create imaginary worlds that presumably remain the same no matter how many times one reads them. Imaginary creatures—elves or unicorns or TV cops—are not affected by the real world. They cannot be, since they don't exist. In contrast, the kind of imagination I have been developing in this essay is much closer to the old, immanent, conception. Critically, it is in no sense static and free-floating, but entirely caught up in projects of action that aim to have real effects on the material world, and as such, always changing and adapting. This is equally true whether one is crafting a knife or a piece

of jewelry, or trying to make sure one doesn't hurt a friend's feelings.

It was precisely in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, which saw the origins of industrial capitalism, modern bureaucratic society, and the political division between right and left, where the new transcendent concept of imagination really came to prominence. For Romantics, in particular, the Imagination came to take the place once held by the soul—rather than mediating between the rational soul and the material world, it *was* the soul, and the soul was that which was beyond any mere rationality. It's easy to see how the advent of an impersonal, bureaucratic order of offices, factories, and rational administration would also give rise to this sort of idea. But insofar as the imagination became a residual category, everything that the new order was not, it also was not purely transcendent; in fact, it necessarily became a kind of crazy hodgepodge of what I've been calling transcendent and immanent principles. On the one hand, the imagination was seen as the source of art, and all creativity. On the other, it was the basis of human sympathy, and hence morality.<sup>73</sup>

Two hundred and fifty years later, we might do well to begin to sort these matters out.

Because honestly, there's a lot at stake here. To get a sense of just how much, let's return for a moment to that '68 slogan: "All power to the imagination." Which imagination are we referring to? If one takes this to refer to the transcendent imagination—to an attempt to impose some sort of prefab utopian vision—the effects can be disastrous. Historically, it has often meant creating some vast bureaucratic machine designed to impose such utopian visions by violence. World-class atrocities are likely to result. On the other hand, in a revolutionary situation, one might by the same token argue that *not* giving full power to the other, immanent, sort of imagination—the practical common sense imagination of ordinary cooks, nurses,

mechanics and gardeners—is likely to end up having exactly the same effects.

This confusion, this jumbling of different conceptions of imagination, runs throughout the history of leftist thought.

One can already see the tension in Marx. There is a strange paradox in his approach to revolution. As I've noted, Marx insists that what makes us human is that rather than relying on unconscious instinct like spiders and bees, we first raise structures in our imagination, and then try to bring those visions into being. When a spider weaves her web, she operates on instinct. The architect first draws up a plan, and only then starts building the foundations of his edifice. This is true, Marx insists, in all forms of material production, whether we are building bridges or making boots. Yet when Marx speaks of social creativity, his key example—the only kind of social creativity he ever talks about actually—is always revolution, and when he does that, he suddenly changes gears completely. In fact he reverses himself. The revolutionary should never proceed like the architect; he should never begin by drawing up a plan for an ideal society, then think about how to bring it into being. That would be utopianism. And for utopianism, Marx had nothing but withering contempt. Instead, revolution is the actual immanent practice of the proletariat, which will ultimately bear fruit in ways that we cannot possibly imagine from our current vantage point.

Why the discrepancy? The most generous explanation, I would suggest, is that Marx did understand, at least on some intuitive level, that the imagination worked differently in the domain of material production than it did in social relations; but also, that he lacked an adequate theory as to why. Perhaps, writing in the mid-nineteenth century, long before the rise of feminism, he simply lacked the intellectual tools.<sup>74</sup> Given the considerations already outlined in this essay, I think we can confirm that this is indeed the case. To put it in Marx's own

terms: in both domains one can speak of alienation. But in each, alienation works in profoundly different ways.

To recall the argument so far: structural inequalities always create what I've called "lopsided structures of imagination," that is, divisions between one class of people who end up doing most of the imaginative labor, and others who do not. However, the sphere of factory production that Marx concerned himself with is rather unusual in this respect. It is one of the few contexts where it is the dominant class who end up doing more imaginative labor, not less.

Creativity and desire—what we often reduce, in political economy terms, to "production" and "consumption"—are essentially vehicles of the imagination. Structures of inequality and domination—structural violence, if you will—tend to skew the imagination. Structural violence might create situations where laborers are relegated to mind-numbing, boring, mechanical jobs, and only a small elite is allowed to indulge in imaginative labor, leading to the feeling, on the part of the workers, that they are alienated from their own labor, that their very deeds belong to someone else. It might also create social situations where kings, politicians, celebrities, or CEOs prance about oblivious to almost everything around them while their wives, servants, staff, and handlers spend all their time engaged in the imaginative work of maintaining them in their fantasies. Most situations of inequality I suspect combine elements of both.

The subjective experience of living inside such lopsided structures of imagination—the warping and shattering of imagination that results—is what we are referring to when we talk about "alienation."

The tradition of Political Economy, within which Marx was writing, tends to see work in modern societies as divided between two spheres: wage labor, for which the paradigm is always factories, and domestic labor—housework, childcare—relegated

mainly to women. The first is seen primarily as a matter of creating and maintaining physical objects. The second is probably best seen as a matter of creating and maintaining people and social relations. The distinction is obviously a bit of a caricature: there has never been a society, not even Engels's Manchester or Victor Hugo's Paris, where most men were factory workers and most women worked exclusively as housewives. Still, this frames how we think about such issues today. It also points to the root of Marx's problem. In the sphere of industry, it is generally those on top that relegate to themselves the more imaginative tasks (i.e., they design the products and organize production), whereas when inequalities emerge in the sphere of social production, it is those on the bottom who end up expected to do the major imaginative work—notably, the bulk of what I've called the "labor of interpretation" that keeps life running.<sup>75</sup>

So far I have proposed that bureaucratic procedures, which have an uncanny ability to make even the smartest people act like idiots, are not so much forms of stupidity in themselves, as they are ways of managing situations already stupid because of the effects of structural violence. As a result, such procedures come to partake of the very blindness and foolishness they seek to manage. At their best, they become ways of turning stupidity against itself, much in the same way that revolutionary violence could be said to be. But stupidity in the name of fairness and decency is still stupidity, and violence in the name of human liberation is still violence. It's no coincidence the two so often seem to arrive together.

For much of the last century, the great revolutionary question has thus been: how does one affect fundamental change in society without setting in train a process that will end with the

creation of some new, violent bureaucracy? Is utopianism the problem—the very idea of imagining a better world and then trying to bring it into being? Or is it something in the very nature of social theory? Should we thus abandon social theory? Or is the notion of revolution itself fundamentally flawed?

Since the sixties, one common solution has been to start by lowering one's sights. In the years leading up to May '68, the Situationists famously argued that it was possible to do this through creative acts of subversion that undermined the logic of what they called "the Spectacle," which rendered us passive consumers. Through these acts, we could, at least momentarily, recapture our imaginative powers. At the same time, they also felt that all such acts were small-scale dress rehearsals for the great insurrectionary moment to which they would necessarily lead—"the" revolution, properly speaking. This is what's largely gone today. If the events of May '68 showed anything, it was that if one does not aim to seize state power, there can be no fundamental, onetime break. As a result, among most contemporary revolutionaries, that millenarian element has almost completely fallen away. No one thinks the skies are about to open any time soon. There is a consolation, though: that as a result, insofar as one actually can come to experiencing genuine revolutionary freedom, one can begin to experience it immediately. Consider the following statement from the Crimethinc collective, probably the most inspiring young anarchist propagandists operating in the Situationist tradition today:

We must make our freedom by cutting holes in the fabric of this reality, by forging new realities which will, in turn, fashion us. Putting yourself in new situations constantly is the only way to ensure that you make your decisions unencumbered by the inertia of habit, custom, law, or prejudice—and it is up to you to create these situations

Freedom only exists in the moment of revolution. And those moments are not as rare as you think. Change, revolutionary change, is going on constantly and everywhere—and everyone plays a part in it, consciously or not.

What is this but an elegant statement of the logic of direct action: the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free?<sup>76</sup> The obvious question is how this approach can contribute to an overall strategy—one that should lead, perhaps not to a single moment of revolutionary redemption, but to a cumulative movement towards a world without states and capitalism. On this point, no one is completely sure. Most assume the process could only be one of endless improvisation. Insurrectionary moments there will surely be. Likely as not, quite a few of them. But they will most likely be one element in a far more complex and multifaceted revolutionary process whose outlines could hardly, at this point, be fully anticipated.

In retrospect, what seems strikingly naïve is the old assumption that a single uprising or successful civil war could, as it were, neutralize the entire apparatus of structural violence, at least within a particular national territory—that within that territory, right-wing realities could be simply swept away, to leave the field open for an untrammelled outpouring of revolutionary creativity. But the truly puzzling thing is that, at certain moments of human history, that appeared to be exactly what was happening. It seems to me that if we are to have any chance of grasping the new, emerging conception of revolution, we need to begin by thinking again about the quality of these insurrectionary moments.

One of the most remarkable things about such insurrectionary upheavals is how they can seem to burst out of nowhere—and then, often, dissolve away just as quickly. How is it that the same "public" that two months before saw the Paris Commune,

or the Spanish Civil War, had voted in a fairly moderate social democratic regime will suddenly find itself willing to risk their lives for the same ultra-radicals who received a fraction of the actual vote? Or, to return to May '68, how is it that the same public that seemed to support or at least feel strongly sympathetic toward the student/worker uprising could almost immediately afterwards return to the polls and elect a right-wing government? The most common historical explanations—that the revolutionaries didn't really represent the public or its interests, but that elements of the public perhaps became caught up in some sort of irrational effervescence—seem obviously inadequate. First of all, they assume that “the public” is an entity with opinions, interests, and allegiances that can be treated as relatively consistent over time. In fact what we call “the public” is created, produced through specific institutions that allow specific forms of action—taking polls, watching television, voting, signing petitions or writing letters to elected officials or attending public hearings—and not others. These frames of action imply certain ways of talking, thinking, arguing, deliberating. The same “public” that may widely indulge in the use of recreational chemicals may also consistently vote to make such indulgences illegal; the same collection of citizens is likely to come to completely different decisions on questions affecting their communities if organized into a parliamentary system, a system of computerized plebiscites, or a nested series of public assemblies. In fact the entire anarchist project of reinventing direct democracy is premised on assuming this is the case.

To illustrate what I mean, consider that in English-speaking nations, the same collection of people referred to in one context as “the public” can in another be referred to as “the workforce.” They become a “workforce,” of course, when they are engaged in different sorts of activity. The “public” does not work—a sentence like “most of the American public works in the service

industry” would never appear in a magazine or paper, and if a journalist were to attempt to write such a sentence, her editor would certainly change it to something else. It is especially odd since the public *does* apparently have to go to work: this is why, as leftist critics often complain, the media will always talk about how, say, a transport strike is likely to inconvenience the public, in their capacity of commuters, but it will never occur to them that those striking are themselves part of the public—or that if they succeed in raising wage levels, this will be a public benefit. And certainly the “public” does not go out into the streets. Its role is as audience to public spectacles, and consumers of public services. When buying or using goods and services privately supplied, the same collection of individuals become something else (“consumers”), just as in other contexts of action they are relabeled a “nation,” “electorate,” or “population.”

All these entities are the product of bureaucracies and institutional practices that, in turn, define certain horizons of possibility. Hence when voting in parliamentary elections one might feel obliged to make a “realistic” choice; in an insurrectionary situation, on the other hand, suddenly anything seems possible.

What “the public,” “the workforce,” “the electorate,” “consumers,” and “the population” all have in common is that they are brought into being by institutionalized frames of action that are inherently bureaucratic, and therefore, profoundly alienating. Voting booths, television screens, office cubicles, hospitals, the ritual that surrounds them—one might say these are the very machinery of alienation. They are the instruments through which the human imagination is smashed and shattered. Insurrectionary moments are moments when this bureaucratic apparatus is neutralized. Doing so always seems to have the effect of throwing horizons of possibility wide open, which is only to be expected if one of the main things that that apparatus normally does is to enforce extremely limited horizons. (This is probably why, as Rebecca Solnit has so beautifully observed,<sup>77</sup>

people often experience something very similar during natural disasters.) All of this would explain why revolutionary moments always seem to be followed by an outpouring of social, artistic, and intellectual creativity. Normally unequal structures of imaginative identification are disrupted; everyone is experimenting with trying to see the world from unfamiliar points of view; everyone feels not only the right, but usually the immediate practical need to re-create and reimagine everything around them.

The question, of course, is how to ensure that those who go through this experience are not immediately reorganized under some new rubric—the people, the proletariat, the multitude, the nation, the ummah, whatever it may be—that then gives way to the construction of a new set of rules, regulations, and bureaucratic institutions around it, which will inevitably come to be enforced by new categories of police. I actually think that here, some progress has been made. A lot of the credit goes to feminism. Since at least the seventies, there has been a self-conscious effort among those seeking radical change to shift the emphasis away from millenarian dreams and onto much more immediate questions about how those “holes cut in the fabric of reality” might actually be organized in a non-bureaucratic fashion, so that at least some of that imaginative power can be sustained over the long term. This was already true of the great Festivals of Resistance organized around trade summits by the Global Justice movement from 1998 to 2003, where the intricate details of the process of democratic planning for the actions was, if anything, more important than the actions themselves, but it became even more true in 2011 with the camps of the Arab Spring, the great assemblies of Greece and Spain, and finally, the Occupy movement in the United States. These were simultaneously direct actions, practical demonstrations of how real democracy could be thrown in the face of power, and experiments in what a genuinely non-bureaucratized

social order, based on the power of practical imagination, might look like.

Such is the lesson, I think, for politics. If one resists the reality effect created by pervasive structural violence—the way that bureaucratic regulations seem to disappear into the very mass and solidity of the large heavy objects around us, the buildings, vehicles, large concrete structures, making a world regulated by such principles seem natural and inevitable, and anything else a dreamy fantasy—it is possible to give power to the imagination. But it also requires an enormous amount of work.

Power makes you lazy. Insofar as our earlier theoretical discussion of structural violence revealed anything, it was this: that while those in situations of power and privilege often feel it as a terrible burden of responsibility, in most ways, most of the time, power is all about what you *don't* have to worry about, *don't* have to know about, and *don't* have to do. Bureaucracies can democratize this sort of power, at least to an extent, but they can't get rid of it. It becomes forms of institutionalized laziness. Revolutionary change may involve the exhilaration of throwing off imaginative shackles, of suddenly realizing that impossible things are not impossible at all, but it also means most people will have to get over some of this deeply habituated laziness and start engaging in interpretive (imaginative) labor for a very long time to make those realities stick.

I have spent much of the last two decades thinking about how social theory might contribute to this process. As I've emphasized, social theory itself could be seen as kind of radical simplification, a form of calculated ignorance, a way of putting on a set of blinkers designed to reveal patterns one could never otherwise be able to see.

What I've been trying to do, then, is to put on one set of blinkers that allows us to see another. That's why I began the

essay as I did, with the paperwork surrounding my mother's illness and death. I wanted to bring social theory to bear on those places that seem most hostile to it. There are dead zones that riddle our lives, areas so devoid of any possibility of interpretive depth that they repel every attempt to give them value or meaning. These are spaces, as I discovered, where interpretive labor no longer works. It's hardly surprising that we don't like to talk about them. They repel the imagination. But I also believe we have a responsibility to confront them, because if we don't, we risk becoming complicit in the very violence that creates them.

Let me explain what I mean by this. The tendency in existing social theory is to romanticize violence: to treat violent acts above all as ways to send dramatic messages, to play with symbols of absolute power, purification, and terror. Now, I'm not saying this is exactly untrue. Most acts of violence are also, in this sort of very literal sense, acts of terrorism. But I would also insist that focusing on these most dramatic aspects of violence makes it easy to ignore the fact that one of the salient features of violence, and of situations it creates, is that it is very boring. In American prisons, which are extraordinary violent places, the most vicious form of punishment is simply to lock a person in an empty room for years with absolutely nothing to do. This emptying of any possibility of communication or meaning is the real essence of what violence really is and does. Yes, sending someone into solitary is a way of sending a message to them, and to other prisoners. But the act consists largely of stifling out the possibility of sending any further messages of any kind.

It is one thing to say that, when a master whips a slave, he is engaging in a form of meaningful, communicative action, conveying the need for unquestioning obedience, and at the same time trying to create a terrifying mythic image of absolute and arbitrary power. All of this is true. It is quite another to insist that that is all that is happening, or all that we need to talk about. After all, if we do not go on to explore what

"unquestioning" actually means—the master's ability to remain completely unaware of the slave's understanding of any situation, the slave's inability to say anything even when she becomes aware of some dire practical flaw in the master's reasoning, the forms of blindness or stupidity that result, the fact these oblige the slave to devote even more energy trying to understand and anticipate the master's confused perceptions—are we not, in however small a way, doing the same work as the whip? It's not really about making its victims talk. Ultimately, it's about participating in the process that shuts them up.

There is another reason I began with that story about my mother and the notary. As my apparently inexplicable confusion over the signatures makes clear, such dead zones can, temporarily at least, render *anybody* stupid. Just as, the first time I constructed this argument, I was actually unaware that most of these ideas had already been developed within feminist standpoint theory. That theory itself had been so marginalized I was only vaguely aware of it. These territories present us with a kind of bureaucratic maze of blindness, ignorance, and absurdity, and it is perfectly understandable that decent people seek to avoid them—in fact, that the most effective strategy of political liberation yet discovered lies precisely in avoiding them—but at the same time, it is only at our peril that we simply pretend that they're not there.