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# The bureaucratic sublime

Emmanuel Grimaud and Anthony Stavrianakis

Translation : Anthony Stavrianakis

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That is sublime in comparison with which  
everything else is small.  
--Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 1987  
[1790]

- 1 What do chicken farming, forest management, financial flows, university admissions, research, the neural activity of comatose patients, plane crashes, the IMF, and great Chinese temples have in common? On the face of it, not much; there are indeed essential differences between them. A chicken is not a tree, a tree is not a comatose patient, even if we speak of a vegetative state, French research may be comparable for some to a plane on the verge of crashing, but the IMF is not a temple, and the wishes deposited by pilgrims in the great Chinese temples are far more varied than the course choices that French baccalaureate holders are asked to submit on the digital higher education application system “Parcoursup.” And yet all these fields are subject to administrative technologies that have made them strangely comparable. Identical logics intervene in a wide range of settings and contexts, apply to an unimaginable diversity of materials and objects, pushing the limits of formal and calculative rationality, of expertise and expert rule, to an unprecedented point.<sup>1</sup> The problems of administration are not new and date back to antiquity, long before we realized that processing and controlling humans, chickens, neurons, or airplanes could be done with models sharing improbable common characteristics. Numerous works have demonstrated the long history and immensity of the problems to be solved that have confronted administrative rationalities in a range of times and places, taking up cultural, social and political configurations as varied as those of the Bronze Age, Mesopotamia, and China (Cole 2020; McMullen 2018; Oppenheim 1959; Postgate 2013; Robson 1999). But no one seems to have pointed out, despite the diversity of creative solutions devised (devices, techniques, formulas, etc.) and the heterogeneity of the fields administered, the existence and paradoxical permanence of this mysterious force of attraction (and repulsion) that is the subject of this special issue and which we have chosen to call *the bureaucratic sublime*.

- 2 Between the need for bureaucracies to administer people and things on interstellar scales and the evolutions specific to capitalism, strange alchemies are taking place today, strange formulas have appeared, alloys that are oh-so supreme. To grasp this, we can no longer really rely on the sociological vocabulary inherited from the first eight decades of the 20th century (Albrow 1970; Allison & Halperin 1972; Mann 1984, 1986; Silberman 1993). Many researchers have noted, for example, that the governing technologies of “advanced liberalism,” clearly identified by Nikolas Rose (1993), strive to govern through individualized choice and calculation. We won’t dwell on the endless debates dealing with the relationship between states and political-economic liberalisms, what neoliberalism contains that is truly “neo” (Collier 2012, 2017), or what it means for a government administration to be an active force in the creation and maintenance of markets and their mechanisms (Foucault 2008). This special issue does not seek to redress the limitations or shortcomings of the available sociological conceptual base, nor indeed to solve technical problems specific to bureaucratic administrative science.<sup>2</sup> Our aim lies elsewhere: to touch on the neglected aesthetic dimension of the “bureaucratic sublime.”<sup>3</sup>
- 3 To question this aesthetic dimension in terms of the bureaucratic sublime is not a matter of utopian denunciation (Koselleck 1988 [1959]), nor is it (or not yet in our eyes) a concept claiming to serve the purpose of a realistic analysis of administrative technologies, such as that proposed by Hill and Hupe (2014), Lipsky (1980), or Weller (2018). Rather, this form of the sublime that is bureaucratic is a horizon that refuses nomination within its own logic, an unspeakable that nonetheless guides the future of these technologies and that, once recognized as a driving force, obliges us to attempt paths other than that of mere investigation, to operate gestures other than the simple analytical report, in order to grasp the affective and imaginary work that occurs – and that can be curiously encouraged – when coming into contact with, brushing against, these organizational forms so central to modernity.

## The three meanings of the bureaucratic sublime

- 4 The bureaucratic sublime can be understood in three senses. Firstly, it refers to the act of sublimating bureaucracy performed by our contributors: a gesture combining text and graphic arts that aims to capture the moment when bureaucratic forms actually bend those they administer to their will, while at the same time questioning the imaginative capacities we have to grasp these organizational structures with which we are in a relationship of both cooperation and confrontation.
- 5 Secondly, the bureaucratic sublime refers to affective power in Burke’s sense (1998 [1757]) and then that of Kant (1987 [1790]), i.e. the capacity for attachment, seduction, or attraction that bureaucratic forms exert on those who are in regular, if not constant, contact with them. This is the enthusiasm that the bureaucrat feels for his or her work – enthusiasm, Kant tells us, is the idea of the good accompanied by a particular affect (ibid.: 132) – or else “the still higher state” of “being without affects” (*phlegma in significatu bono*), enabling a lasting state of “admiration” (ibid.: 132).
- 6 For those on the other side of the counter (or today, very often, the screen), the affective dimension of the sublime most often takes the mixed form of pity, terror, wonder, and disgust when it comes to receiving formal instructions, or doing the considerable work of imagination to interpret, according to one’s idea of it, what one

assumes to be the reasoned discourse behind the bureaucratic or technocratic demand (Graeber 2012). Denial? Perhaps. Projection, complicity or mere wishful thinking? It's precisely this complicity that the artists in this special issue have had fun rerouting towards new ends.

- 7 The bureaucratic sublime is obviously striking in its similarity to the Kantian transcendental sublime, but it also borrows some of its features from the recent reflections of literary theorist Sianne Ngai, in particular from her incredibly original work *Ugly Feelings*, whose term “stuplimity” combines the sublime and the stupid in a single neologism (Ngai 2009: 248-297). Ngai seeks to capture “the aesthetic experience in which astonishment is paradoxically united with boredom” (ibid.: 271), and in particular the experience of becoming painfully aware of one's powerlessness in the face of forms of infinite magnitude (Kant's mathematical sublime<sup>4</sup>) or terrifying power (Kant's dynamic sublime<sup>5</sup>). The bureaucratic sublime inevitably combines both, and any experience of encountering the power of an organizational form can plunge us into the stupor of “stuplimity”.
- 8 Finally, the bureaucratic sublime can be understood in a third sense. Despite their apparent inertia, bureaucracies have never ceased making radical transformations. Historians, for example, have distinguished between “heavenly” and “earthly” bureaucracies, two model historical forms of bureaucracy. And while there are certainly others, it's possible to hypothesize a form that could be described as “sublime” or even subliminal. In *The Kingdom and the Glory*, Giorgio Agamben tells us that “long before the terminology of civil administration and government was developed and fixed, it was already firmly constituted in angelology” (Agamben 2011 [2007]: 158). The angels of heaven exchange their properties with earthly officials: “Exactly the same as in the case of the angels, the orders of ecclesiastical functionaries are distinguished according to the three functions of purification (*purgare*), enlightenment (*illuminare*), and perfection (*perficere*)” (ibid.: 157). In reality, celestial forms of bureaucracy did not precede the development of earthly forms of bureaucracy, like phantasms suspended in the ether. Rather, they were often interwoven, in ancient and medieval times, in a variety of alloys with a cosmic dimension.
- 9 Even if these earlier forms necessarily had their moments, their figures, their procedures and their *sublime* affects in Kant's sense, the identification of a third “subliminal” stage of bureaucracy, which would constitute its apotheosis, is a historical challenge to which this introduction wishes to contribute in all modesty, with no other claim than to stimulate future debate. Indeed, large-scale participation, the massive internalization of these rules, their recasting in the form of algorithms and the limitation of human interaction to the strict minimum, are among the ingredients that enable bureaucracy to become commonplace, intruding into the smallest interstices of collective life to the point of claiming subliminal existence. As we shall see, the bureaucratic sublime thus seeks to perform a curious transmutation operation, beyond the “celestial” and the “terrestrial”.

## Deserted sublime

- 10 The bureaucratic sublime digs under two extravagances of the utopian imagination. The first is technocracy, which we often forget was originally an anti-capitalist utopia

in the strictest sense. An apolitical social movement born in the United States in the 1930s, conceived by a group of East Coast engineers, technocracy promoted the idea of an administration finally governed by technicians, specifically aiming to replace the price system, after the 1929 crisis, with a rationalized system of production and distribution managed by scientists and engineers. In short, a technological bureaucracy without capitalism. The second is the classic liberal critique of bureaucracy, as expressed in particular by Ludwig von Mises (1944), based on two arguments: firstly, the problem with bureaucracy is its interference in markets – which in reality assumes that markets could regulate themselves without outside intervention; secondly, bureaucracies are formed at the request of the part of the electorate that loses out in the economic game, and which therefore has an interest in having markets regulated by outside intervention: well-meaning civil servants become, in this view, more influential than elected rulers, jeopardizing democracy.

- 11 This argument is obviously false, since it ignores a central point underlined by all socio-historical analyses of bureaucracy, and in particular those by Max Weber: that bureaucracy has accompanied (or even preceded) the development of capitalism, but it is by no means its result (Weber 2019 [1921]). You can have bureaucracy without capitalism – Weber even analyzed the case of China (1951 [1915]) – but there is no such thing as capitalism without bureaucracy.<sup>6</sup> David Graeber also makes this point, referring to what he somewhat ironically calls the “iron law of liberalism”, according to which “any market reform, any government initiative intended to reduce red tape and promote market forces will have the ultimate effect of increasing the total number of regulations, the total amount of paperwork, and the total number of bureaucrats the government employs” (Graeber 2015: 9). The image of capitalism’s “steel cage” or, more correctly, Weber’s “steel shell” (*stahlharte Gehäuse*)<sup>7</sup> remains relevant.
- 12 For Weber, bureaucracy was simply a formal term for any type of rational organization with the following characteristics: a division of labor, an organizational hierarchy, operational rules, an impersonal environment, and a formal selection process based on competence. By contrast, what matters here, and that was among Weber’s major concerns throughout his life, is that the organizations he characterizes as bureaucracies develop rationalized conducts within the framework of capitalism, which draw on democratic norms while at the same time upsetting the principles of the latter (Habermas 2018; Mann 1984). These tensions have been widely identified: the ever-increasing financialization of bureaucracies and sovereign debt management (Crouch 2018; Streeck 2018); the threat of force that sustains all bureaucratic forms;<sup>8</sup> and the absence of determinism in technology, since these forms are always – and it’s crucial to remember this – the result of political choices. Another tension is essential if we are to grasp the concerns of the contributors to this special issue: bureaucracies are taking over a whole field of semantics, multiplying the injunctions to creativity, optimization, productivity, and self-sublimation – just think of the rhetoric of the techno-futures sold by Silicon Valley, combining, in their vocabulary, “rupture” and “creativity.” These are all languages we have no choice but to internalize, and which solicit strong support, even though the very fact of adhering to them paradoxically acts as a brake on creativity. It’s a situation that could be pushed to the extreme of Bateson’s double-bind (e.g. to receive the injunction to be spontaneous!).<sup>9</sup> These curious transfers and rhetorical borrowing games within modern bureaucracies need to be placed within a broader dynamic, already well studied in their day by Deleuze and Guattari: desires and

production flows are constantly being de/re/territorialized, de/re/coded into new forms – algorithmic trading and crypto-currencies known as blockchains are good examples – embedded in new regulations, injunctions, rites, and laws. Capitalism and schizophrenia find their sublime alchemical equilibrium in the acceleration of this movement.

- 13 The growth in the scope and intensity of this movement and these flows has, paradoxically, reached the point where bureaucracy, which in Weber's day was synonymous with efficiency, has now become synonymous with slowness, and finds itself under incredible pressure when faced with phenomena exceeding a certain speed threshold. The Covid-19 crisis is a case in point. While the spread of the virus and its mutations posed a challenge to any organization, they also provided an opportunity to criticize the slowness of bureaucratic processes, at least in France, on both the right and the left. It was also an opportunity to question the other means available to collective action to achieve the flexibility and fluidity required to meet the demands of the day.

## Exit torpor

- 14 Our objective with the bureaucratic sublime is an act, a small counter-gesture in the midst of this semiotic desert. This special issue wagers that it would be entirely possible to escape the paralysis into which the sprawling thickness of the bureaucratic phenomenon plunges us day after day if we took the trouble to reintroduce play into it, through simple yet radical gestures. Writing of fantasy literature, Graeber suggests that the genre is “largely an attempt to imagine a world utterly purged of bureaucracy, which readers enjoy both as a form of vicarious escapism and as reassurance that ultimately, a boring, administered world is probably preferable to any imaginable alternative” (Graeber 2015: 186), later adding the observation that “What ultimately lies behind the appeal of bureaucracy is fear of play” (ibid.: 193). If Graeber is, alas, probably right, it's not clear that every attempt has been made to renew attention to these “dead zones,” as he so aptly calls them: these zones that can “make anyone stupid” and that are

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. (Ibid.: 102)

What would happen if we invested these zones with the full power of our imagination?

- 15 If it's difficult to perform gestures as simple as filling out a form incorrectly, not sending it, crossing it out, hijacking it, or sending back a document scrawled with insults or curses, it's because to a certain extent, as Graeber again points out, we're invested in these forms. Nevertheless, it seems to us essential, and even vital today, to ask what would happen if we allowed ourselves to play, on an experimental basis, with these invasive impersonal documents that we receive every day, with a simple gesture. What would happen, not to bureaucratic organizations – they would no doubt survive – but to our idea of what constitutes a rule, an organization, of what defines the notions of rationality, technicality, efficiency, speed, and slowness? Other implicit aspects of bureaucratic processes may well emerge in this process of estranging such familiar



material. We are trying to grasp what escapes them, their blind spots, the threshold beyond which the application of a logical rule becomes not just violent but aberrant, the volume of complication that must not be exceeded, without which it is the entire creativity of collectives that is put at risk. For we must ask ourselves what is organic in an organization when it has reached a degree of complexity that escapes us, what is unruly in a rule pushed a little too far, what is incalculable in a calculation that takes on the air of a magic formula, what is ill formed in a reform, or what is truly dialogical or else unspoken in a question-and-answer form.

- 16 It's on this alchemical scale, under the label of sublime bureaucracy, that we find it interesting to situate ourselves and the researchers and graphic designers participating in this special issue. It's not just a matter of noting that bureaucracy has always succeeded in sublimating itself into new, embarrassing forms, right up to its latest digital or algorithmic stage. It's about trying out a new alchemy of operations, using procedures so soporific as to be repulsive, and documents so cumbersome and sometimes distressingly banal, if only to see, on an experimental basis, what comes out of them.
- 17 Perhaps nothing very articulate will come of it, or nothing that could be well formulated, apart from a few beautiful images, the effect of authors choosing to push the formula of intensive chicken farms to the limit, or to mimic the bureaucracy of trees in Gabon, for example; apart from some fine performances when they attempt to depict the scales used to assess comatose patients; apart from some poetic stammerings, when they apply rules (such as the principles of the "*programmation pluriannuelle de la recherche*") or algorithms (such as Markov chains, used in artificial intelligence) to texts. Perhaps there's nothing that can be transposed into concrete proposals in these anamorphoses of apparatuses, devices, evaluation grids, and languages that are impossible to thwart, despite the degree of incoherence they sometimes reach. Nothing that can be immediately transformed into new rules, instructions, or programs for future reforms of bureaucracies. If this is the case, it must be asked why those who are concerned with reform aren't able to read images. To act on the very documents of bureaucracy themselves, taking them up, or taking them back, graphically, intervening on their forms, is too seldom tried in order to triturate the phenomenon of bureaucracy. When an organization can no longer be synthesized in a representable form, when it is no longer figurative in a single body (the good old metaphor of the "cosmic body" in which each and everyone has their place, often used to define celestial bureaucracies, galactic polities, or the hierarchies of angels and divinities), there is something not quite right. It's a point of view, our own. Hence the need to do the exercise: beyond organigrams that hardly make sense, can an organizational form really be figured, and are its modes of action and operations representable? Is there really nothing in the "dead zone" that constitutes this or that bureaucratic procedure that couldn't give rise to the work of refiguration? It is not pointless to ask what would be needed to be able to find within the act itself of filling out a form (for example) fluidity, lightness, empathy, creativity, the feeling of being recognized, the impression of being alive, since, after all, this is what is always in question, and it is of course their capacity to suffocate such vital needs rather than to let them prosper that is the target of the critique of bureaucratic rationalities.



## Bureaucracy, when you (be)hold us

- 18 What will not be found in this special issue is a deep-dive comparison between different bureaucracies across space and time (albeit there will be a couple of brief excursions: to Chinese “celestial bureaucracy,” as well as tree management in Gabon). Neither will there be a meticulous study of the ways in which these bureaucracies have been coupled to digital capacities, transforming them into algorithmic mega-machines, veritable participative matrices against which those mega-machines that have preceded them pale in comparison (Mumford 1967, 1970). There would, however, be lots to say about the digital transformation of administrations. From what point, what threshold, can it be said that a simplification complicates existence, that an algorithm depersonalizes relations, that virtual corridors and labyrinths multiply beyond all interactions? We can all recall the experience of these thresholds where digital utopia (Tréguer 2019) collides with its own blindspots. For the old images drawn from Kafka of labyrinthine buildings must be substituted those of new opacities, impersonal jungles where we find, though not always in a coordinated fashion, programs in the process of deep learning and where whoever wishes to see their demand recognized must first teach these algorithms how to teach them.<sup>10</sup> We won’t elaborate on this. Every techno-critique worth its salt has sufficiently underscored how we are at the same time participants and test-subjects in large-scale experiments, taking place under the label of the “digital revolution,” carried away along with our administrations toward the same experimental destiny, where new techniques never cease to be frenetically tried out, abandoned, readjusted.
- 19 Bureaucratic processes are today one of the favored terrains on which to experiment with artificial intelligences, self-learning computer models, and the management of massive data sets. Who could have imagined such osmosis between computing and bureaucracy? The idea that we could be outmatched by computer programs, an idea at the heart of what is called the Technological Singularity, is perhaps all the more banal and easy to represent to oneself since we have all experienced various forms of bureaucratic singularity, so often and with such obviousness that it becomes very easy to imagine being outstripped by artificial intelligence, as idiotic as it may well be (see the exercise performed by the Recursion Lab in this issue).<sup>11</sup> In this context, it is not pointless to endeavor to identify the mechanisms of sublimation specific to the *bureaucratic sublime* and for which the digital was able to appear as the ultimate solution, even if it’s not the only one, to allow administrative technologies to gain in intensity, in fluidity, in mobilization, and also in irrationality.
- 20 The digital appeared at an evolutionary stage of bureaucratic devices when sadly nothing had been learned from decades of complexifying processes. Liberal democracies have never really known how to lighten the hypercomplexity of their organizations, which only translated their incoherence and contradictions into digital matrices at a never before reached scale. As for totalitarian states, they got digitally carried away with an ease that has been embarrassing for techno-utopianists, who had rather different dreams for digital practices. “Social credit” in China is perhaps the best example. This ingenious system of surveillance and evaluation made many analysts suggest that modern China was taking an Orwellian turn. What is not sufficiently underscored, however, is that this new form of digital bureaucracy, which sublimates prior forms, needs the complicity of people and their smartphones in order to exist.

People in China today have no other choice than to be immersed in it, to evaluate and have themselves evaluated. If large-scale participation and immersion are two essential characteristics (but not the only ones) on which bureaucracies are staking themselves in order to change, this special issue insists on the object itself that is to be sublimated, or what we decided to call the regimes of bewitchment specific to bureaucracy.

- 21 Following Graeber, we observe that whatever one's political opinions, whether one lives in a liberal democracy or a totalitarian state, we are all both victims and accomplices of the dreams of absolute rationalization, amongst which must be counted the expansionist frenzies of bureaucracies, both here and elsewhere. As victims, we have multiple daily Kafkaesque experiences, some of which made their way into this issue. We are inevitably accomplices because the profusion of rules, the volume of paperwork, the incalculable number of forms riddled with barely understandable acronyms is certainly a reflection of the complexity reached by a certain level of organization, but it is also the indirect monstrous consequence of our own desire to see the decree of rules. We bend to them all the while protesting, knowing that there is no other choice than to play the game if we want things to "function." Thanks to the work of sociologists, historians, and anthropologists, we have an idea about the psychological mechanisms involved in bureaucratic bewitchment.
- 22 Let's remind ourselves of some of the mechanisms already well identified by authors who preceded us. The embarrassing strangeness of bureaucratic development was indicated remarkably by Max Weber: once a bureaucracy is created, it is almost impossible to get rid of it. And the only way to eliminate a bureaucracy is to kill all its members, as Genghis Khan did in the Middle East, or Alaric the Goth in imperial Rome. Another mechanism, this time revealed by Lewis Mumford, is the sentiment of participating in the "cosmic fantasy" that underlies all bureaucratic or technocratic organization. Mumford saw in the apparatuses of early state formation in antiquity, in their modes of labor organization and their ritual machinery, the first "mega-machines." Such organizations were often produced to serve megalomaniacal construction projects (such as the pyramids of Egypt), wills for power, conquest, or cosmic harmony, which only large-scale organizations could support. In order to formulate their organizational models, the best mega-machines often draw from something beyond themselves. The organism, with its different limbs, components, and coordinations, served as a model or metaphor for many very ancient bureaucratic organizations (Schlanger 1971) that referred to the vitality of an existing body (cosmic body, celestial body, etc.) to enlist and coordinate a mass of participants. And when Mumford makes the historical leap from ancient organizations to contemporary ones, it is to emphasize, as a good humanist should, how difficult it becomes to reclaim human capacities for action once they have been externalized into organizations or apparatuses.
- 23 It may be a mistake to lump all mega-machines from antiquity to the present into the same category. But if we allow ourselves to extrapolate slightly from Mumford's argument that organization is a vital matter, it would seem that there are organizations that are viable, and others that are not. It is quite possible that with the exponential development of apparatuses and rules, an organization enters a crisis once it no longer forms a coherent, comprehensible, and livable body. Incoherent monsters begin to proliferate, equipped with contradictory organs, redundant arms, and multiple heads. What kinds of monsters are we unknowingly creating with papers and forms? Are there

viable equivalents to these chimerical organizations in the universe of these species? Perhaps none. Perhaps, ideally, we should only accept as viable those organizations that can be depicted as coherent creatures.

- 24 While some bureaucracies have shown great inventiveness in mixing the celestial and the terrestrial in a cosmic assemblage, we must acknowledge that there exists *an imaginary of structures*. What would happen if an organization modeled itself, for example, on other bodies, other forms of organisms, like the “reflex republics” that naturalist Jakob von Uexküll described (the best example being sea urchins)? Is there not a way for the bureaucratic sublime to finally sublimate itself? This is a question to ask if we are to diagnose the viability conditions of different organizations. Bureaucratic imaginaries are not always lacking in imagination, especially the oldest ones. The celestial bureaucracy of today’s Chinese monks, who burn the vows of pilgrims so that they reach the “celestial officials,” is a good example of a successful act of sublimation in this regard. But the bureaucratic sublime undoubtedly admits other paths. Subliminal images emerge in this special issue, of a crocodile in the financial landscape, for instance, reminding us that there is indeed a stake in “sublimating” the sublime by other techniques.
- 25 It is no coincidence that Graeber sees in the pantheons of monsters and sprites a form of resistance to the sterilization of imagination imposed by bureaucratic apparatuses. But this is not the essence of his argument. Borrowing much of Weber’s insights, he insists on other analytic keys, notably highlighting the relationship between bureaucracies and games, which is essential for understanding their mechanisms of bewitchment. Graeber distinguishes between “play,” understood as freedom or room for maneuver, and “games,” understood as devices that dictate rules to follow or clear, shared constraints. It is the properties of the latter (games) that bureaucracies exploit, limiting at all costs the possibilities for the former (play) to express itself.
- On the one hand, a bureaucracy is anything but playful. Mechanistic and impersonal, it would appear to represent the negation of any possibility of playfulness. On the other hand, being trapped in a bureaucratic runaround feels very much like being caught inside some kind of horrific game. Bureaucracies create games – they’re just games that are in no sense fun. (Graeber 2015: 190)
- 26 Despite the historical depth and sociological subtlety of such diagnoses, we must face the obvious: we have no solution. Despite the effort to raise awareness of the mechanisms of bewitchment that we have pointed out, and which Graeber sums up by the expression “bureaucratic appeal,” no magic formula seems to offer a solution. Instead, we see a piling up of new structures, new devices, new forms that often complicate things rather than simplify them. These authors, likely paralyzed by the complexity of the phenomenon, their reflections on the bureaucracy of their time being based on observation and investigation, fail to show us what would be needed to reclaim the capacities of imagination, representation, response, unjustly anesthetized by the bureaucratic act. The proof of the bewitchment’s effectiveness is that we cannot imagine another solution. Sociologists and anthropologists have well identified, behind the diversity of schemes for technical governance, the dual bottleneck that can constitute, at a certain level of organizational complexity, the recognition of technicity for its own sake (the need to train organizational specialists as well as technicians to solve the problems these specialists face) and the opacity/visibility of rules (we constantly oscillate between the claim to stakes of transparency and the actual will to render them opaque). Once the necessity of rules for communal functioning merges

with the obligation to materialize these rules in writing, in visible apparatuses, and forms, there is no way to stop the movement. Common sense would dictate that to solve this problem, we sit down and talk, but this would likely require organizing a steering committee, setting up consultative procedures, or possibly a general assembly. It would mean establishing rules dictating how to function, and it is likely we would spend entire days deciding how to do it – in short, a whole organization to organize the organization. The dilemma haunts every collective, even those waging war against “technocracy” or questioning the means of action to address ecological issues. How do we escape? How do we break the vicious circle of our own desire (for it is indeed our desire) to see clear rules laid out, materialized, formulated? Once we decide that the rules to follow must be transparently inscribed somewhere – and this means there must be people to implement them – how do we avoid their inevitable inflation? Can we counter organizational compulsions with anything other than organization? This delicate problem is the starting point of this special issue, the state of primordial contradiction that only a series of alchemical operations can resolve. This is, at least, the wager we are making: to indicate a path to sublimating complexity.

## The celestial, the terrestrial, and the subliminal

- 27 The *bureaucratic sublime*, let’s recall, has no other ambition than to open avenues for future research. It would be a mistake to think that administrative technologies have already reached the stage of the “sublime” after the “celestial” and the “terrestrial.” They wrestle with the sublime; it is not given, it has to force itself, drag itself out even, both with and without the knowledge of those whom these technologies try to administer. Ideally, we should watch for its present and evolving forms, for it occurs right inside administrations, tectonic shifts are indeed taking place: decisions from the “upper echelons,” spread downward, new tools are constantly tested and circulated, new games are developed, all while searching for the optimal state. It may be that a bureaucracy deserves the qualifier “sublime” only when it learns from the difficulties of earlier “celestial” and “terrestrial” bureaucracies regarding mobilization. This is simply a hypothesis. The digital realm, for example, has undoubtedly provided bureaucracies with unparalleled capacities to engage participants, but that doesn’t mean the techniques of “celestial” bureaucracies, with their unique way of populating the invisible, should be relegated to the depths of history. On the contrary, they might prove decisive in nourishing future forms of play within games in Graeber’s sense, as well as attachments to the bureaucratic sublime in the way we understand it, and whose power of bewitchment this issue only begins to point out.
- 28 Renewing their own techniques of bewitchment is indeed the problem of all administrative technologies. From there, other hypotheses can be formulated. A bureaucracy could well approach a subliminal threshold when the horror and admiration it provokes are almost instantly reversible. The digital age has multiplied the occasions to experience such reversible feelings, shifting between fascination and terror when confronted with a form to fill out, which, dissected into countless boxes to fill, legal safeguards, and other preconditions to lock down (a keyword from recent memory), becomes intimidating. Admiration for the scope and complexity of an organization is then immediately reversible into its opposite – terror – no matter which side of the counter you are on. With the ability to process vast quantities of data, the

sublime takes on an increasingly cyclothymic form, following inexplicable oscillations that have the gift of irritating and further fascinating, generating bugs and inextricable complications. Digital bureaucracies, though gaining in intensity and matrix-like presence, may, in this sense, be more irrational than previous ones: they live in constant fear of system failure, and those who comply with them fear disappearing from a register without any explanation. To be able to rediscover, by way of the digital, the kind of sublimation carefully orchestrated by the officials of the Chinese “celestial” bureaucracy in their ritual fire (where paperwork, once burned, reaches the divine spheres via the smoke that serves as a conduit), there is no doubt a long way to go.

- 29 Let us summarize briefly the gesture attempted by the contributors to this special issue. First, researchers were asked to identify a particularly tiresome, hard-headed, or off-putting administrative document, form, or procedure. Each researcher then worked in collaboration with an artist to perform a “unbewitching” on this document, procedure, or form. By this, we do not mean anything magical or supernatural, although many administrative documents are the privileged supports of various rituals worldwide to represent people: reworked and sometimes scribbled on, they are used to obtain things, to act at a distance on uncooperative officials, or to obtain one’s passport to the beyond when bureaucracy extends to the heavens (see Cui and Chenivresse in this issue). In our case, it was rather a question of seeing how to heal from the paradoxical seduction exerted by procedures, rules, or formulas by reworking the very documents in which they are actively embodied, identifying what these documents represent as much as what they hide. Hence the division of this issue into three sections: (I) Form, Forms, and Formulas, (II) Matrices, and (III) Sublimations. The reader is invited to guess which matrices are hidden behind a form and what subliminal bureaucratic aspects the authors attempted to target, denounce, or subvert by combining text and image. We endeavor to take the formula of intensive chicken farming to its extreme, as Bartholeyns proposes; to take seriously the injunction to finally engage in “Darwinian” research, as suggested by Moutaud and Lemerle in their science fiction exercise; to revisit the scales of measurement applied to comatose patients, as proposed by Chibout, Bikard, and Pophillat; to manipulate documents, subvert them, test the elasticity of imposed magical formulas, and point out the blind spots of their sublime potential. If we are to regain some agility in the face of cumbersomeness, fluidity in the face of blockage, freedom in the face of a mechanism that is too constraining, or singularity in an anonymous procedure, we have no other choice than to play with documents, to engage with their devitalized material to see what could be re-played in them. To blow up the “dead zones” after decades of condemnation and diagnoses that have changed nothing, we have no other choice than to try other games, another mode of play, heterogeneous forms of unbewitching (or counter-bewitchment), even if they turn out to be trivial, aberrant, burlesque, or of the order of magical operations. It is a matter of performing a perceptual and conceptual shift of the iconic, the optical sublime (Krauss 1993), navigating beyond eclectic zones: between chickens, algorithms, finance, coma, and plane crashes, the “dead zones” are not only numerous, they are also far more diverse than the all-encompassing, flattening term “bureaucracy” suggests. This is not a default operation. If we want to patiently reclaim a margin of creativity, even if it seems small and trivial, perhaps this is where we must start.

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## NOTES

1. Clearly the social science literature on formal, institutional, and bureaucratic rationalities is enormous. On technologies of administration in public and private organizations, see, amongst others, Bruno & Didier 2013; Herzfeld 1993; Ogien 2010; Strathern 2000; Supiot 2015.
2. On technologies of administrative capture, see the critique by Mises, Laffont & Tirole 1993, more specifically chapter 11, "Regulatory Capture", as well as Stigler 1971.
3. There are a couple of notable exceptions, however, that explore this problem: see Hull 2012; Vine & Carey 2017.
4. For Kant, the mathematical sublime corresponds to the feeling we experience when we encounter something very large, for example when thinking about infinity as a whole.
5. Kant (1987 [1790]: 132): "When in an aesthetic judgment we consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us, then it is dynamically sublime."
6. See Weber 2019 [1921] on types of rules in bureaucracy.
7. The translation of this metaphor has given rise to much debate. Weber uses the term *Das Gehäuse* several times in his writings; its connotations include hull (or shell), casing, envelope, and possibly a cage. Weber's metaphor echoes English theologian Richard Baxter's assertion that worldly goods should be like a cloak that can be shed effortlessly.
8. Few of the contributions in this special issue deal directly with the fact that the disruption of order is controlled by the state through the use of violence. One example is amendment 147 to the *Loi de programmation de la recherche pour les années 2021 à 2030*, which contains an explicit threat to dissuade students and other members of the university community who wanted to mobilize against a project with which they disagreed.
9. Let's recall here Albert O. Hirschman's triad of exit, voice, and loyalty (1970), which is particularly useful for analyzing public services.
10. Among the researchers doing serious in-depth inquiry into this let us mention the work of sociologist Marie Alauzen (cf. Aluazen 2024).
11. We wrote this text at the end of 2020, roughly two years before the bursting on to the public scene of tools such as Chat GPT.

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