

## editorial

# historicizing bureaucratic encounters

“Administration [has] become this peculiar institution which, being half police, half aristocratic casino, has instilled in the Austrian a deep dread of the ‘authority’. He does not trust it, it does not trust him. He is terrified when he is summoned. It is irritated when he has to appeal to it after all. And both just wish not to have to deal with one another.”<sup>1</sup>

“My primary association with the word *bureaucracy* was an image of someone expressionless behind a counter, not listening to any of my questions or explanations of circumstance or misunderstanding but merely referring to some manual of impersonal regulations as he stamped my form with a number that meant I was in for some further kind of tedious, frustrating hassle or expense.”<sup>2</sup>

More than a hundred years have passed between the respective publications of these two prefatory quotes. One is from a theatre review by the Austrian novelist Hermann Bahr, the other from a novel by the U.S. American author David Foster Wallace, and yet they seem strangely akin.<sup>3</sup> Encounters with bureaucracy, so it seems,

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1 I would like to express my gratitude to Peter Fleer and Thomas Süssler-Rohringer for their valuable comments to this editorial.

„die Verwaltung [ist] bei uns jene merkwürdige Anstalt geworden, die, halb Polizei, halb adeliges Kasino, dem Österreicher das tiefe Grauen vor der „Behörde“ anezogen hat. Er traut ihr nicht, sie ihm nicht. Er erschrickt, wenn er vor sie gerufen wird. Sie ist gereizt, wenn er sich doch einmal an sie wenden muß. Und beide wünschen sich nur, nichts miteinander zu tun zu haben.“ Hermann Bahr, Rat Schrimpf, in: Neues Wiener Tagblatt, 14.4.1905, 10 (translation mine).

2 David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*, Boston 2008, 262.

3 I am not going to discuss the innumerable depictions of bureaucracy and its protagonists in fiction here – from Nikolaj Gogol’s *Inspector-general* and Franz Kafka’s *Castle* to Douglas Adams’ local planning department in Alpha Centauri (in *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*) or J.K. Rowling’s British Ministry of Magic (in the *Harry Potter* books). Suffice it to recall Dwight Waldo’s statement that “one can learn much about administration from novels”, Dwight Waldo, *The novelist on organization & administration; an inquiry into the relationship between two worlds*, Berkeley 1968, 4.

are not considered enjoyable, as a rule.<sup>4</sup> Or, in other words: it is a lot easier to find quotes and examples of unpleasant experiences than positive ones.

If it is true that “[n]owadays, nobody talks much about bureaucracy”,<sup>5</sup> as David Graeber stated at the outset of his 2015 oeuvre “The Utopia of Rules”, *this volume* about points of contact between bureaucracies and those who get to deal with them sets out to remedy this lacuna – at least as far as historical research is concerned. Graeber rightly observes that the 1960s and 1970s were a much more prolific era in regard to public discourse on bureaucracy, academic or popular, than the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Furthermore, he laments that currently criticism of bureaucracy is only voiced on the part of the political right, whereas the left is lacking theoretical and practical tools of criticism, and therefore resorts to watered-down versions of right-wing criticism.<sup>6</sup>

If we look towards historical research on bureaucracy of the last years or even decades, we see a different picture, although bureaucratic encounters as such are not a typical object of research in administrative history.<sup>7</sup> Recent studies have, on the one hand, looked at tools and techniques and other material aspects of administration.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, they have discussed concepts and theories: bureaucracy as knowledge<sup>9</sup> rather than interaction and encounters.<sup>10</sup> The launch of the open-access journal *Administory – Journal for the History of Public Administration* in 2016 marks a new surge of interest in administrative history in Europe. While the journal covers a broad range of themes, bureaucratic encounters have been addressed in some of the contributions to its 2018 issue titled “Bureaucracy and Emotions”.<sup>11</sup>

The present volume draws attention to bureaucratic encounters of the past. The term bureaucracy – “bureau” originates from the coarse cloth used on office

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4 There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, see the discussion of bureaucratic encounters and street-level bureaucracy below. Peter du Gay has set out to highlight the positive sides of bureaucracy, defending it against criticism of it being unemotional and dehumanizing, involving too much red tape or not adhering to entrepreneurial values, see Peter du Gay, *In praise of bureaucracy*, London/Thousand Oaks/New Delhi 2000.

5 David Graeber, *The utopia of rules: on technology, stupidity, and the secret joys of bureaucracy*, Brooklyn NY/London 2015, 3.

6 Graeber, *Utopia*, 6, 10.

7 Jos C.N. Raadschelders’ overview of administrative history includes one (of twelve) chapters that deals with the relation between citizens and government in regard to three fields of attention: participation, representation and citizenship, see Jos C.N. Raadschelders, *Handbook of administrative history*, New Brunswick/London 2012, 167–189.

8 Peter Becker, *Kulturtechniken der Verwaltung. Forschungsbericht verfasst im Auftrag des Schweizerischen Bundesarchivs von Prof. Dr. Peter Becker*, Deutsche Hochschule für Verwaltungswissenschaften, Speyer/Wien 2010.

9 Cf. Sebastian Felten/Christiane von Oertzen (eds.), *Histories of bureaucratic knowledge*, *Journal of the History of Knowledge*, Special Issue 2020.

10 See the excellent overview of the state of the art in Sigrid Wadauer’s contribution to this volume.

11 Peter Becker et al. (eds.), *Bureaucracy and Emotions*, *Administory* 3/2018.

desks<sup>12</sup> – covers a wide range of meanings, from administrative staff to the entire system of administration or governance. While for a long time reflection on bureaucracy largely focused on its internal functioning, its outward function has, only over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, become a matter of wider political and academic interest.<sup>13</sup> In this volume, our focus is specifically on its outward function.

*Bureaucratic Encounters*, the eponymous term for this volume was first used in sociological studies from the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>14</sup> Such studies set out to evaluate the quality of services offered by the state and made use of by citizens. The findings contradicted some popular beliefs, showing that governmental services were utilized not only by poor people and minorities, or that a considerable part of clients experienced such bureaucratic encounters as rather positive.<sup>15</sup>

In order to delineate the meaning of bureaucratic encounters Vincent Dubois' considerations are useful:

Bureaucratic encounters are part of the administration's daily grind – a world apparently made up of routine and anonymity, but whose centre is unstable, and whose protagonists cannot always be pigeon-holed into predefined roles. Bureaucratic encounters are where identities find a new beginning, when personal life stories are told and, in some aspects, come to life in the privacy of an administration desk. Bureaucratic interaction is the set of mostly unwritten rules that controls the conditions of administrative relations and guarantees their correct use. Nevertheless, this interaction plays out in diverse ways, as it has different purposes and functions.<sup>16</sup>

While the term was largely applied in empirically based studies of contemporary bureaucratic encounters, a few others took, to some extent, a historical perspective.

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12 “From the tablecloth, the table covered with it got the name *bureau*, and next this word was applied to the office room itself”, Fritz Morstein Marx, *The administrative state: an introduction to bureaucracy*, Chicago 1957, 17.

13 “‘Service’ as a different form of interaction – or generally any forms of dealing with the population other than in terms of administrative procedures – were initially no priorities in public administrations and their bureaucracies”, [„Service“ als eine andere Form des Umgangs – oder überhaupt andere als verfahrensrechtliche Formen des Umgangs mit der Bevölkerung – hatten in den öffentlichen Verwaltungen und ihren Bürokratien zunächst nie Priorität.“] Raoul Kneucker, *Bürokratische Demokratie, demokratische Bürokratie. Ein Kommentar zu Struktur, Gestalt und System der Bürokratie in Europa*, Wien 2020, 247 (translation mine). We can, however, observe early debates e.g. about the role of bureaucracy in creating trust into the state, including questions of the ‘quality of service’, see Thomas Rohringer’s article in this volume.

14 Elihu Katz/Brenda Danet, *Petitions and Persuasive Appeals: A Study of Official-Client Relations*, in: *American Sociological Review*, 31/6 (1966), 811–822; Daniel Katz et al., *Bureaucratic Encounters: A Pilot Study in the Evaluation of Government Services*, Michigan 1975.

15 Katz et al., *Encounters*.

16 Vincent Dubois, *The bureaucrat and the poor*, Aldershot 2010, 2.

Yehekel Hasenfeld et al. stress the interrelation between the emergence of welfare states and the occurrence of bureaucratic encounters.

“The frequency with which citizens interact with welfare state bureaucracies is a direct function of the rapid growth of the welfare state in terms of both the scope of its programs and services and the range of their coverage. As a result, a profound change has occurred in the relations between citizens and the state in both the dependence of the citizens on the state for protection and the state’s obligations toward its citizens.”<sup>17</sup>

Hasenfeld et al. analyse bureaucratic encounters as models of social exchange in an unequal setting. Depending on the degrees of the applicants’ freedom of choice and the officials’ degree of discretion, they discern four types of encounters: customer (high freedom of choice, high discretion), consumer (high freedom of choice, low discretion), client (low freedom of choice, high discretion) and inmate (low freedom of choice, low discretion).<sup>18</sup>

Another crucial term that developed in the wake of the aforementioned studies is *street-level bureaucracy*, coined by Michael Lipsky in the early 1980s. It refers to public service workers who are in direct contact with citizens and who have to make discretionary judgements in the course of their work. Public service covers a wide range of agencies such as social welfare offices, youth welfare offices, police stations and courts. Street-level-bureaucracy implies an analysis of the state from bottom-up. Lipsky argues that “the decisions of street-level bureaucrats, the routines they establish and the devices they invent to cope with uncertainties and work pressures, effectively become the public policies they carry out.”<sup>19</sup> Lipsky highlights the unfavourable power relations for the citizens, but also acknowledges that bureaucrats grapple with ambiguities, expectations they cannot meet, a scarcity of resources and crushing caseloads. Street-level bureaucracy has become a powerful concept that keeps inspiring new research in the social sciences, including such that apply participant observation, thereby turning the researcher into a bureaucrat, if only temporarily.<sup>20</sup>

This volume of the ÖZG borrows the term and the fascination with the interface between citizens and state bureaucracy from the aforementioned scholarship, but sets out for something different from the sociological and ethnographic studies.

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17 Yehekel Hasenfeld/Jane A. Rafferty/Mayer N. Zald, The welfare state, citizenship, and bureaucratic encounters, in: Annual Review of Sociology 13 (1987), 387–415, 388.

18 Hasenfeld et al., Welfare state, 402.

19 Michael Lipsky, Street-level-bureaucracy. Dilemmas of the individual in public services, New York 2010 [1980], xii.

20 Bernardo Zacka, for one, conducted ethnographic fieldwork by volunteering as a receptionist at an antipoverty agency in a large city in the northeastern United States, Bernardo Zacka, When the state meets the street: Public service and moral agency, Cambridge, Mass./London 2017.

For one the contributions to this volume cover a period in which the modern welfare state had not yet emerged or was only beginning to do so.<sup>21</sup> Obviously, participant observation is not an option when your object of research belongs to bygone times. Yet, various sources allow for insights into bureaucratic encounters of times past. The contributions ask how citizens and other persons who get into touch with authorities perceived the state thusly represented. They investigate changes occurring in the way these encounters are taking shape, including deliberate efforts to change these ways. The perspective of the bureaucrats or those who decide about the way bureaucracies should function is easier to grasp than that of their vis-à-vis. However, we do get some insights into the position and agency of “bureaucratic subjects” in the sense of Michael Lipsky’s study.<sup>22</sup>

The idea for this volume originates from the international workshop “Bureaucratic encounters” held in Vienna in June 2018. The contributions to this workshop covered the period from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present, investigating various fields of research such as poor relief, police work, triage in emergency departments and asylum procedures.<sup>23</sup> Four of the participants have contributed papers to this volume, two of which focus more directly on bureaucratic encounters and street-level bureaucracy, whereas the two others are dealing with politicians’ social scientists’ and other experts’ discourse on how to shape bureaucratic encounters between bureaucrats of various types with the respective “bureaucratic subjects”.

Sigrud Wadauer tackles inconsistencies and discrepancies within bureaucratic encounters on the example of police control of persons who were poor and sometimes without a fixed abode. Such persons were deemed suspicious – if not downright criminal. This is a case of street-level bureaucracy in Austria in the 1920s and 1930s concerned with registration and identification and based on cases from mostly regional courts from various parts of Austria. Practices of administration follow rules, and still mistakes are common.<sup>24</sup> Once they are registered in bureaucratic procedures

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21 For a brief historical overview see Johanna Kuhlmann, What is a welfare state?, in: Bent Greve (ed.), Routledge Handbook of the Welfare State, London 2018, 13–22, 14–15.

22 This use of the term “bureaucratic subjects” as those who are subjects to bureaucracy but are not bureaucrats themselves, differs from others who rather refer to those working *within* bureaucracies when using this term, e.g. Peter Becker/Rüdiger von Krosigk, Introduction. New perspectives on the history of bureaucratic and scientific subjects, in: Idem (eds.), Figures of authority. Contributions towards a cultural history of governance from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, Brussels 2008, 11–26, 22–23.

23 Egor Lykov has kindly written a workshop report published on the platform H-Soz-Kult: Tagungsbericht: Bureaucratic Encounters, 15 June 2018 – 16 June 2018 Vienna, in: H-Soz-Kult, 17.07.2018, <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-7796> (26.5.2021).

24 Troubles with various spellings of proper names as described by Wadauer are not only a problem of backward provincial policemen of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Just think of David Graeber’s accounts of having his first name misspelt as “Daid” or his last name as “Grueber”, Graeber, Utopia, 48.

they can become more powerful than the undocumented truth. Wadauer cautions against overestimating the power of the state and its administration, a belief that is prevalent especially among academics. The relationships presented here are certainly hierarchically structured, but it would be misleading to think that authorities always had the upper hand. Bureaucratic subjects had their ways to deal with administrative practices, and authorities had to put up with these ways in a process that Sigrid Wadauer refers to as a joint production of administrative procedures.

Peter Fler adopts both a historical and an (auto-)ethnographical position by investigating his own professional environment as an archivist. The reading room, in this case, represents the interface where citizens (historians or other interested persons) get in touch with the state in the shape of papers and documents that contain government and state information. Peter Fler traces the development of this interface over more than 170 years. Until the end of the 19th century, the archive primarily served the state authorities. It was only afterwards when archival materials of the Swiss Federal Archives began to inform academic historical research. The clientele developed from a few hand-picked individuals with government authorization to the broad public. Fler also draws attention to the changing architecture, the points of entry, the interaction required to gain access to papers and documents. The implementation of new technologies and the onset of digitalization brought about new changes, turning the archivist into a “screen-level bureaucrat”.<sup>25</sup> Both Wadauer and Fler argue against the view on bureaucracy that confuses Weberian ideal types of rational administration with real practice.<sup>26</sup>

Thomas Rohringer’s contribution is not investigating the interaction between bureaucrats and citizens itself. Instead, he traces the discussions of administrative reformers of the late Habsburg monarchy about the potential of such encounters to create trust, which, in turn, was to enhance the legitimacy of the state. In order to foster such encounters, the state administration should be brought to the local level and take over many responsibilities from the autonomous local and provincial administration, thus transforming the imperial state into a provider of services. Rohringer draws upon the concept of *throughput legitimacy* in order to account for the tensions between trust and power when it came to suggest more participation of the population. Though stronger trust towards the state was the aim, those reformers harboured distrust towards the citizens as political and bureaucratic subjects.

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25 Mark Bovens, Stavros Zouridis, From Street-Level to System-Level Bureaucracies: How Information and Communication Technology Is Transforming Administrative Discretion and Constitutional Control, in: *Public Administration Review* 62/2 (2002), 174–184, 177–178.

26 Such misapprehensions have been criticized before, see Renate Mayntz, Max Webers Idealtypus der Bürokratie und die Organisationssoziologie, in: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 17 (1965), 493–502.

Michał Gałędek's article takes us back to the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, to the starting point of modern Polish state bureaucracy (as well as that of other European states).<sup>27</sup> In the period under research, territorial borders were changing, and foreign powers, notably France, influenced the discourses on the ideal model of administration. These models were, on the one hand, collegial decision-making and, on the other hand, one-man-administration. To some extent, these models were associated with national traditions: collegial decision-making was presented as a traditional Polish model as opposed to the centralistic Napoleonic system. Similar to Thomas Rohringer's contribution, Gałędek also addresses the conflicts between centralistic and local administration. Although the discussions presented in the article were conducted on a meta-level, they were still touching questions of bureaucratic encounters – and encounters between bureaucrats and how they should be shaped. For instance, collegiality was recommended by its advocates as a means against arbitrariness and lawlessness, as an instrument of control over officials who would become too powerful otherwise. Moreover, it was intended as a mechanism of protection against bureaucratic alienation of the political power.

Furthermore, this volume contains two more articles that do not originate from the above-mentioned workshop. Ildikó Asztalos Morell investigates public-work-based agricultural production, organized by the state from above as well as by local initiatives in disadvantaged rural areas of post-socialist Hungary with the goal of fighting against food poverty. Uta Kanis-Seyfried allows the reader to gain insight into the biography of the Jewish physician Malvine Rhoden who practised in Germany and Austria in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, trying to find a balance between emancipatory self-realization and bourgeois gender norms, and who was forced to emigrate to the United Kingdom in 1939.

In addition to these research articles, an interview with the photographer Jan Banning about his project “Bureaucratics” is included in this volume. Exhibitions of “Bureaucratics” have been shown in many countries since 2008. Banning's depictions of street-level bureaucrats from Bolivia, China, France, India, Liberia, Russia, the USA and Yemen have recently been investigated (if rather descriptively) by ethnographers.<sup>28</sup> The interview focuses on how Jan Banning, together with his colleague, the late writer Will Tinnemans, managed to take photographs of these

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27 Jos C. N. Raadschelders/Mark R. Rutgers, The evolution of civil service systems, in: Hans A. G. M. Bekke/James L. Perry/Theo A.J. Toonen (eds.), *Civil service systems in comparative perspective*, Bloomington 1996, 67–99.

28 Bagga Bjerge/Mike Rowe, Public Service Iconography: Desks, Dress, Diploma, and Décor, in: Helen Sullivan/Helen Dickinson/Hayley Henderson (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of the Public Servant*, Basingstoke 2020, 1–19.

officials at their desks,<sup>29</sup> but also brings out Banning's self-reflexive, socio-critical and also deeply human and respectful approach. Possibly, such an approach might show steps towards a critique of bureaucracy from the left that Graeber finds so sorely lacking in contemporary discourse.

Summing up, it is safe to say that there *is* a lot of talking about bureaucracy, and this time it is the historians' turn to weigh in.

Therese Garstenauer

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<sup>29</sup> Jan Banning has thankfully granted us permission to publish two of these photographs in the volume at hand.