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The Utopia Of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, And The Secret Joys Of Bureaucracy

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The Utopia of Rules
On Technology, Stupidity, and the
Secret Joys of Bureaucracy
David Graeber
Author of <i>Debt: The First 5,000 Years</i>
"A brilliant, deeply original political thinker." —Rebecca Solnit

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Synopsis

From the author of the international bestseller *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* comes a revelatory account of the way bureaucracy rules our lives. Where does the desire for endless rules, regulations, and bureaucracy come from? How did we come to spend so much of our time filling out forms? And is it really a cipher for state violence? To answer these questions, the anthropologist David Graeber—one of our most important and provocative thinkers—traces the peculiar and unexpected ways we relate to bureaucracy today, and reveals how it shapes our lives in ways we may not even notice. Although he also suggests that there may be something perversely appealing—even romantic—about bureaucracy. Leaping from the ascendance of right-wing economics to the hidden meanings behind Sherlock Holmes and Batman, *The Utopia of Rules* is at once a powerful work of social theory in the tradition of Foucault and Marx, and an entertaining reckoning with popular culture that calls to mind Slavoj Žižek at his most accessible. An essential book for our times, *The Utopia of Rules* is sure to start a million conversations about the institutions that rule over us—and the better, freer world we should, perhaps, begin to imagine for ourselves.

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Customer Reviews

How has bureaucracy combined "financialization, violence, technology, the fusion of public and private" as all "knit together into a single self-sustaining web"? In these three essays, two already published but reworked somewhat, David Graeber turns to this question. In his *Debt: The First*

5000 Years" (reviewed by me May Day 2014) he looked at how this single web expanded to tangle all of us, long ago. In "The Democracy Project" (reviewed by me June 2014), he extrapolated from his participation in Occupy Wall Street to examine how direct rather than representational democracy can work. An anarchist anthropologist, he writes in a lively style, even if his books can sprawl and scatter his ideas, for he keeps shifting his scrutiny, it seems on paper, as fast as another realm of investigation or application enters his perceptions. This quality, therefore, may dissuade readers demanding a more academically focused, and perhaps less personally engaged, study. But if you can handle the looser approach, Graeber again delivers a readable, if impatient at times, look at how an all-encompassing top-down structure bears down on everyday folks, and why you and I may oddly find "secret joys" in the predicaments we face when dealing with paperwork and red tape. In essay 1, the left, Graeber finds, tends to favor the conformity in the guise of equal access and lack of favoritism that bureaucracies were invented to carry out, in lieu of nepotism, bribes, or cronyism. Graeber peers into this and uncovers the threat of violence, however muffled or cloaked, for those who do not go along. The police, he alleges, are merely "bureaucrats with weapons," after all.

What intense pleasure this book gave me, despite the dull topic: bureaucracy. Anthropologist David Graeber is perhaps best known for "Debt: The First 5,000 Years" (2011), which became required reading for the Occupy Wall Street movement. In that book, Graeber showed that the standard explanation for the origins of money, rehearsed in dozens of economics textbooks, was a fairy tale. In "The Utopia of Rules," Graeber similarly claims that the conventional wisdom about bureaucracy is misleading; although strongly associated with the public sector, today's bureaucracies can't be understood apart from the rise of the modern corporation. Noting that the right's critique of bureaucracy has been extraordinarily successful, Graeber maintains that the left needs to develop a new way of talking about it. This set of loosely connected essays is an attempt to begin that conversation. Graeber argues that we have entered the era of total (or predatory) bureaucratization. Characterized by advanced technology, a fusion of public and private power, and the state violence to maintain it, this new system is exceedingly wasteful, at least for the ordinary citizen. If you've ever retyped your entire resume into a potential employer's database, you have some inkling of its extravagance. But total bureaucratization, Graeber argues, is remarkably efficient at one thing—extracting profit. Based on the notion that paperwork creates value, it begins with the irritating case-worker determining whether you are really poor enough to merit a fee waiver for your children's medicine, and it ends with men in suits engaged in high-speed

trading of bets over how long it will take you to default on your mortgage.â •To support his analysis, Graeber returns to familiar turf: banking.

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