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Dereliction at the South African Department of Home Affairs: Time for the anthropology of bureaucracy

Colin Hoag

University of California at Santa Cruz, USA

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Abstract

In this article, I consider how a temporal reorientation of bureaucracy studies – from retrospective analysis of outcomes to prospective analysis of states of possibility manifest in moments of bureaucratic waiting – could help students of bureaucracy to think non-normatively about the relationship between policy and practice. I draw on ethnographic fieldwork with low-level officials at visa permitting offices of a South African immigration bureaucracy to explore how time textures everyday bureaucratic processes and configures one's understanding of what is possible in bureaucratic encounters. I develop the concept of “dereliction” to describe the ambiguous condition of hope and despair experienced by people engaged in bureaucratic encounters, illuminating the technologies that produce and manage this ambiguity, such as counters, cubbies, and temporary extension permits. While previous authors have shown that bureaucracies work to capture and control time, I shed light on a somewhat different sort of power: bureaucracies' ability to orient people toward the future.

Keywords

Ethnography of the state, bureaucracy, policy-practice problematic, time, dereliction, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Colin Hoag, Department of Anthropology, University of California at Santa Cruz, 1156 High Street, Santa Cruz, CA 95064, USA.

Email: colinhoag@gmail.com

Introduction

Time is central to the experience and operation of bureaucracy. Bureaucracies trap moderns in queues, delaying us endlessly with senseless networks of procedure. If time is a primary medium through which bureaucracies work, then we should know something about the nature of bureaucratic time. What can we learn about bureaucracy by paying close attention to its temporality? That is the question this essay sets out to answer.

My context is the South African Department of Home Affairs (DHA), a notoriously inefficient and corrupt state bureaucracy charged with managing immigration as well as domestic identity documentation. It is, for many observers in South Africa, a hopeless state department. Year after year, reform after reform, the DHA remains the laughing stock of the civil service. Home Affairs is nevertheless an obligatory passage point for many people in South Africa and legions of hopeful permit applicants pass through its halls daily. Their applications are submitted and circulated between offices for stamps and signatures. Applications often make their way back to their intended destination, sometimes after many months away; and other times they seem to disappear. During 10 months of fieldwork at DHA offices in Johannesburg, I waited along with clients and bureaucrats for applications to return from their travels – and waited, and waited some more.¹

Anthropological analyses of bureaucratic time are surprisingly few, given how powerfully bureaucracies control and contort time. Previous analyses have primarily identified “captured” time as the target of their critiques, that which is held ransom from more or less powerless clients (Chalfin, 2010; Sellerberg, 2008; Smart and Smart, 2008; Verdery, 1996). Like anyone who has been caught in a bureaucratic delay, surely, I am sympathetic with these views. Time is more than a resource to be exploited, however. It is a terrain of lived experience filled with hope, anxiety, and much else. It is lively and strange. It stands still in moments of duress; it races by in hindsight; it gets punctuated by the tick of the clock, the full moon, and the traffic update. Within bureaucracies, time is contradictory. It appears both linear and circular in the sense that Stephen Jay Gould (1987) describes: bureaucratic procedures orient the applicant toward a specific endpoint (e.g., the reception of a visa certificate); yet, the whims of the bureaucracy continually return the applicant to square one (e.g., the request to submit still more paperwork to complete the application). “Time captured” – highlighted by many analysts of bureaucracy – is linear time; this essay asserts the importance of accounting also for circular time in bureaucratic worlds.

To illustrate the anticipation experienced by those who find themselves in a bureaucratic encounter at the DHA, an encounter framed by more or less clear procedure and yet nevertheless deeply indeterminate, I introduce the concept of “dereliction.” “Dereliction” is a liminal state between the policy and the practice of that policy. The concept describes those moments when hopeful observers (e.g., clients, anthropologists, bureaucrats) of bureaucratic processes become skeptical: when their prospective perspective on the paperwork not yet arrived

slips into a retrospective perspective on bureaucratic failure. It enables me to incorporate time into my reading of bureaucracy by probing the limit points between prospection and retrospection, hope and despair. After situating my intervention within a social and historical context of the South African DHA, and within the theoretical context of social scientific literature on bureaucracy, I describe three cases where dereliction manifests itself at visa permitting offices of the DHA: in the smudges on teller windows and old permanent residence certificates; in the office infrastructures that confound one's perception of how bureaucratic procedures are progressing; and in the "Form 20" extension permits that officially recognize bureaucratic failure and restart the application process once again.

Hope for the South African DHA?

The DHA is a large and complex organization. It comprised two main branches – the Civic Affairs Branch (CAB), and the Immigration Services Branch (ISB) – both beset by similar problems surrounding application processing time, customer service, and corruption. The CAB manages identity documentation for South African nationals at offices across the country, issuing birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates, and the important national ID. The ISB, the focus of my research, deals strictly with non-South Africans: it provides them with temporary and permanent residence permits, regulates immigration at border posts, seeks out and deports persons found to be in violation of the Immigration Act (e.g., by possessing a fake or expired permit), and adjudicates claims for asylum, among other responsibilities. Although much of the South African public ire regarding the DHA is directed toward the CAB on account of South Africans' more direct personal experience with it, the ISB comes in for plenty of similar criticism from immigrants, tourists, the immigrant rights community, businesses that rely on foreign workers, as well as some South Africans who blame it for failing to regulate the flow of immigrants they see as harmful to the South African economy and society.

It is important to contextualize complaints about the DHA. Home Affairs sits at the center of a national debate about "illegal" immigration in South Africa and the effects of immigration on employment availability. Widespread nativism and xenophobia in South Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001; Hassim et al., 2008; Landau, 2012; Southern African Migration Project, 2008) fan the flames of public frustration over the state of the DHA. Some complaints are also tangled up with public cynicism toward the black government by nostalgic whites (and others) who recall a more efficient civil service under Apartheid (see Posel, 1999). All the same, there are very real shortcomings at the DHA, and their root causes are multiple. Affirmative action regulations and challenges associated with the restructuring of the post-Apartheid civil service have meant that a large number of management posts sit vacant at any given moment, compromising DHA leadership (Chipkin, 2011; Hoag, 2010a; see also Picard, 2005). Departmental

initiatives such as training and infrastructure improvement are often underfunded; some aspects of immigration policy stand in contradiction with other Departmental demands; and, yes, the DHA has its share of apathetic and incompetent bureaucrats (Hoag, 2010b; Wa Kabwe-Segatti and Landau, 2008). A series of “Turnaround Strategies,” most notably one that began in 2006 under then Home Affairs Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, have sought to reform the DHA through staff training, revised workflows and protocols, refurbished infrastructure, and better coordination. But despite some scattered achievements, these efforts have been largely unsuccessful (Segatti et al., 2012).

As it stood at the time of research, applying for a residence permit at the DHA can take anywhere from 30 days to 5 years, from the submission of an application to the issuance or denial of the permit. During the period between submission and the issuance of a decision, it is difficult to say precisely what is happening to an application at a given point in time – for bureaucrats as well as clients. After filing an application, it gets moved from one tray, cubby, section, or office to another and another and another until it returns. Not all take the same path, as some are queried for more information, while others suspected of fraud are sent away for investigation, and still others simply disappear. In my observations at the downtown Johannesburg office where I conducted fieldwork, many applications were processed without a problem. Many other applications, however, remained “in processing” for extended periods of time, or were deemed lost or “misplaced.” Sometimes applications thought to be lost turned up. Sometimes they did not. “Come back in a week,” bureaucrats would often say to clients, hoping that the application would reappear in the meantime. Eventually, the client’s permit would come through. For the most part, anyway. The Department seemed to be always on the verge of fulfilling its obligations to the client and yet also always on the verge of failure. Clients were not alone in their anticipation of a positive outcome: though the stakes were much lower for bureaucrats, they, too, waited anxiously for these applications to arrive and satisfy their frustrated clientele. The experience of clients and bureaucrats (and anthropologists for that matter) who sought to apprehend the status of an application was characterized by *prospection*. We all waited, looking forward to its reappearance.

Situating these cases within an analytical framework of policy and practice is no good: they are located somewhere in the gap between the universal rule and its local enactment. Hirokazu Miyazaki’s (2003) work on hope as method in anthropology helps me to account for the ethnographic import of these applications not yet returned. While studying certain moments of hope during Fijian gift giving, as donors awaited responses from recipients, Miyazaki noticed a temporal incongruity between his retrospective analysis and the prospective perspective of his hopeful research subjects. Miyazaki ultimately concluded that the only way for observers – whether anthropologists or gift givers – to apprehend hope is by employing hope as a method of analysis: using the impossibility of analytical synchronicity as a foundation for a philosophical orientation toward the “not yet” (2003: 11–16;

Bloch, 1986). This is because, he says, the “retrospective treatment of hope as a subject of description forecloses the possibility of describing the prospective momentum inherent in hope” (Miyazaki, 2003: 8). Hope, seen retrospectively, is no longer scrutable. And yet, for those involved in a bureaucratic encounter at the DHA, prospection sometimes gave way to retrospection. Over the course of time, an absent application was deemed “lost.” The applicant’s suffering and the Department’s failure came into focus beyond a doubt. So while hope as method can help articulate the experience of bureaucratic time, the passing of time itself can affect the character of hope. Hope, in short, has a shelf-life: it struggles against an abyss of skepticism and despair.

Clients waiting at the DHA oscillate between a state of care and neglect, a condition that I propose to call “dereliction.” A set of formal rules and informal, personal assurances about future actions hold clients in an orbit of bureaucratic hope, while time drags them always farther and farther away. Inhabiting this liminal space between care and neglect, between the policy and the practice, applicants and their applications constitute derelict things – *res derelictae* – things of doubtful dominion. A derelict building crumbles for lack of attention from its owner; derelict persons occupy the margins of a society that has forsaken them. A derelict thing is defined by its relationship to a guardian but – whether the derelict thing was deliberately forsaken or simply forgotten – the guardian is always absent. In law, *res derelictae* are found things, potentially abandoned things, whose ownership appears up for grabs. A judge determines whether they are abandoned or merely unattended. I draw upon the tensions of this limit zone between care and neglect to understand the relationship between policy, practice, and time at the Immigration Services Branch of the South African DHA. The concept of “dereliction” – referring to an emergent condition of near-care and near-abandonment – sharpens our understanding of the experience of *limbo* already theorized within migration studies (Cabot, 2012; Mountz, 2011) by specifically highlighting the analytical orientation of legal precarity and bureaucratic practice. Another sense of the term “dereliction,” as in a “dereliction of duty,” helps to keep in mind for us an important normative aspect of bureaucracies: we want them to work well.

Policy, practice, and time in the anthropology of bureaucracy

Bureaucracies are unlike many other anthropological fieldsites in that social action within them is structured or at least framed by a set of formalized rules and procedures. Anthropologists cannot help but analyze practices as set against these rules and procedures, and yet we know that policies and practices are incommensurable. Rules can never be enforced enough, nor specific enough to direct action in context with precision, meaning that bureaucrats’ discretion and interpretation are integral to their work – not a deviation from it (Scherz, 2011). Indeed, *ex post facto* stabilization and justification of an interpretation in some cases might be more important than the “fidelity” of an interpretation (Mathews, 2011; Mosse, 2005; see also Herzfeld, 1992, Heyman, 2004). This incommensurability is the basis for what I call the “policy-practice problematic” (PPP) (Hoag, 2011). The PPP has been a question

machine for bureaucracy studies. Do practices conform to policies? To what extent do rules constrain bureaucrats' agency? How do individual bureaucrats understand or interpret the rules? What factors intervene in the translation of policy into practice? The PPP is extremely productive. But it directs us toward certain conclusions, most notably that the ostensible rationality and dispassion of bureaucracy are not what they seem: that emotion is critical to executing policy "correctly" (Chalfin, 2010; Fuglerud, 2004; Graham, 2002); that informal bureaucratic norms and practices are critical to achieving formal goals (Barnard, 1938; Blau, 1955; Selznick, 1949); or that applying a policy dispassionately is not about universalist equanimity, but rather the internalization and performance of a politically, culturally, or institutionally specific bureaucratic worldview (Gilboy, 1991; Handelman, 1981; Herzfeld, 1992; Heyman, 1995; Hoag, 2010a; Lea, 2012). My identification of the PPP does not represent a condemnation of it, but rather an effort to sharpen our view of the use of paradox in bureaucracy studies, a move that can reinscribe bureaucracies with the same normative logics that critics seek to unsettle. My hope is that such an effort might help us develop new ways of seeing bureaucracy, bureaucratic practice, and bureaucratic power.

Scholars of bureaucracy have recently taken a lateral step from the PPP to investigate bureaucratic decision making and rule following not just as mental processes, but as embodied practices that are worked out through a material infrastructure of documents and databases (see, for example, Hull, 2012a, 2012b; Riles, 2006). Along with this attention to materiality, I suggest that attention to time is an important and underexplored avenue for non-normative analysis. Thinking with time as I do here temporarily decenters "the outcome" – the disarticulated, retrospective bureaucratic event – as the object of inquiry in bureaucracy studies. It does so by stretching out and slowing down the work of commensuration through which a possible relationship between policies and practices is understood. The ethnographic material I present below shows that this decentering ultimately sheds new light on outcomes, which appear to be not only endpoints in a linear bureaucratic process but also mechanisms that generate hope.

Despite the fact that time is central to the experience, navigation, and operation of bureaucracy – think waiting in queues, minding expiration dates, awaiting the processing of paperwork – time has received relatively little substantive attention in anthropological studies of states and institutions. As noted above, it has been seen mostly as a resource captured by states for the purposes of control. Katherine Verdery's (1996) important work, for example, explains how the socialist government in Romania ruled through the temporal regulation of social and economic life (i.e., through bread lines and other seizures of labor time that produced subjection in place of commodities). A similar theme emerges in literature on borders and border regimes, which create "time-space punctuation" (Smart and Smart, 2008; see also Chalfin, 2010; Sparke, 2006) by allowing people of different socioeconomic positions to move through space with greater or lesser speed. Ann-Mari Sallerberg (2008) sees the use of waiting as integral to bureaucracies' rationing of services, and to their ability to "cool down" clients that have been denied resources. From these perspectives, managing time is part of the infrastructure

of social control under neoliberal (post)modernity (Fuller, 2007; also see Thompson, 1967).²

These insights are germane to an analysis of the DHA. Bureaucrats and clients at the DHA are subject to temporal regimes set out by the South African legislature, the DHA leadership, and others regarding legal lengths of stay and application deadlines. Those with the resources to produce the necessary paperwork, or to hire an “immigration practitioner” to submit an application on their behalf, are likely to suffer less at the hands of the DHA than those without means. Bureaucrats might deliberately obstruct or otherwise delay clients for the sake of soliciting a bribe or to moderate the office work-flow. But my ethnographic data suggest that delays were often more haphazard than coordinated; and time in the works above can sometimes seem like so much “stuff,” a resource to be exploited – something bought and sold, gained and lost, rather than lived.

Beyond controlling time or using time like a resource, I assert here that bureaucracies orient people toward the future, and they do so by cultivating a temporality that is both linear and circular. Two works point me in the right direction, in addition to Miyazaki’s (2003). In an analysis of Mexican agrarian reform programs, Monique Nuijten (2003) describes state bureaucracy as a “hope-generating machine,” eliciting pleasures, fears, and expectations from those who engage it. This machine produces the idea that “everything is possible, that cases are never closed and that things will be different from now on” (Nuijten, 2003: 16). Nuijten turns the PPP on its head, showing us not “practice as failed policy,” but “policy as potential practice.” Second, Ilana Feldman’s (2008) historical ethnography of state rule in Gaza sheds light on “tactical” bureaucratic practices oriented toward an uncertain future. Like Miyazaki’s gift givers, who put agency in abeyance as they await recognition from a gift recipient, Feldman’s bureaucrats place questions of institutional legitimacy in abeyance, enabling the bureaucracy to weather the storm of political change in Gaza. Nuijten and Feldman capture the analytical momentum in operation during moments of bureaucratic waiting, which I hope to develop further here. They gesture toward a kind of bureaucratic “future-work,” albeit in two very different ways. Whereas Nuijten’s bureaucrats generate palpable futures for which clients yearn, Feldman’s bureaucrats enable ongoing institutional legitimacy by attending to mundane bureaucratic practices that seem to eschew the importance of the future. It is at this nexus of mundane bureaucratic practice and hope generation, I suggest, that an important form of bureaucratic power is produced and reproduced.

The smudge: Permanent residence permitting, ground floor

Securing a permanent residence certificate in South Africa is a lengthy process, taking anywhere from one to five or more years. A minimum of three visits to the DHA office is necessary simply to submit an application. First, applicants must come to the office to pick up an application form.³ Next the applicant must return

to the office to prove that all of the requisite paperwork has been collected. The DHA website lists the additional documentation as original copies of:

- A full set of fingerprints
- Marriage certificate/proof of spousal relationship, if applicable
- Divorce decree/proof of legal separation, if applicable
- Proof of custody/maintenance, if applicable
- Death certificate in respect of late spouse, if applicable
- Consent of parents in respect of minors, if applicable
- Proof of judicial adoption, if applicable
- Police clearance certificates in respect of all countries in which you resided for a period of one year or longer, since your 18th birthday
- Valid temporary residence permit, if already in South Africa⁴

However, depending upon the grounds on which applicants seek to establish permanent residence (e.g., as a retiree, adoptee, business owner, etc.), there will be additional required documentation (such as proof of sufficient funds, adoption certificates, or business registration information, respectively). Optionally, clients can also submit letters of recommendation, diplomas, and curricula vitae. After the applicant proves to the permanent residence permitting (PRP) official that they have procured the required documentation, the official schedules an “interview,” during which the applicant will officially lodge an application. The wait time for scheduling an interview was two months at the time of research, due to a backlog.

Subsequent to the interview and submission, the application is sent to the DHA’s Head Office in Pretoria. Applicants are told to check back after six to eight months’ time. From the point of submission onward, neither the applicant nor the officials at the PRP office will have any knowledge about the status of the application. Those applicants who want to inquire with the Pretoria office are given a small sheet of paper with the email address and fax number of Mavis Mawela, a contact person at Head Office. According to several applicants with whom I spoke, and even PRP officials themselves, Ms Mawela does not respond to queries. PRP officials have her phone number but were instructed by Head Office not to disclose it to applicants. Johannesburg officials who call Head Office either fail to reach someone on the other end or are rebuffed or ignored by frustrated and unhelpful staff. But decisions on applications rarely return in six months and usually take between one and three years. Sometimes the wait can be as long as five years. One PRP official referred to the Head Office in Pretoria as a “black hole,” and, on another occasion, “the Bermuda triangle.” When the applications finally return to the PRP office, they arrive with one of the following statuses: “approved,” “denied,” or “queried” (i.e., for more documentation). Because the office does not call the applicant when their certificate arrives, the applicant must visit the office periodically to inquire.

My observations and conversations revealed that both applicants and PRP officials were deeply dissatisfied with this system. Applicants must continually check

on their applications, renewing their 90-day temporary residence permits as they go, and a trip to the DHA office is not particularly enjoyable: parking is difficult, the office is always busy, and more often than not applicants go home empty-handed. People waiting at the Permanent Residence counter sit on a single, often overflowing bench, craning their necks at the window. Swarms of people bustle about at other counters behind and beside them. At the time of research, forehead prints were smudged on the teller windows through which they communicated with the DHA officials, marks left by exasperated applicants. A narrow opening situated in the center of the teller window, between the smudges and the reflecting glare of fluorescent lights, forced clients to shift around as they spoke with the official: to be heard over the loud din of the room behind them, they spoke through it; to hear the official, they listened through it; and to read the expression of the official, they looked through it. At the surface of the counter, there was a second opening in the window wide enough to exchange a stack of papers through. Applicants slipped their fingers through it as they handed the official their receipts. Sometimes, they let their fingers linger, occasionally even touching the hand of the bureaucrat for affect. Some seemed to want to hold on to their receipt as they passed it to the official, perhaps fearful that they might not get it back.

While the stakes were much lower for bureaucrats than for clients in this application process, PRP officials were also frustrated with the lack of transparency and the slow pace of application processing. They spent much of their day giving applicants the bad news that a decision had not yet been made on their application. Their work proceeds accordingly: officials take clients' receipts and check the alphabetically organized filing cabinets for a corresponding certificate. When they find the correct folder, usually containing between 10 and 40 certificates, they flip through and attempt to locate that of the applicant in question. (If the applicant submitted less than six months ago, officials often do not bother to check, but rather turn the client away.) Typically, the certificate is not found, and the receipt is handed back to the client. For this reason, these receipts can become soiled, and begin to fall apart as a result of repeated un-foldings and re-foldings. During my many hours at the window, the overwhelming majority of applicants did not receive a decision. On only one occasion did I see someone obtain a certificate of approval. The man exploded into joy, rejoicing with his certificate in hand – he had been waiting for over four years for the decision.

Many of the certificates in the folder were several years old. These older certificates had developed finger-shaped smudges on the top right-hand corner, the result of officials' practiced finger-licking and paper-flipping. I began to wonder: How could certificates possibly go unclaimed? Given the apparent anxiousness with which applicants wait for their permanent residence status, and the fact that applicants have to renew their 90-day temporary residence permits as they go, surely these certificates should have been claimed? I asked one PRP official how it could be that there were so many old ones. She shrugged her shoulders: "Sometimes," she said, "people leave the country because of the delay, or maybe they died? I don't know."

These smudges are the traces of dereliction. Thought to be lost, these certificates were in fact in process. Seen in the finger smudges on old certificates and in the forehead smudges on teller windows from exasperated applicants, multiple possible derelictions are in operation: bureaucrats have been abandoned by their Head Office (*or are these applications being processed as we speak?*); applicants have been abandoned by the bureaucracy (*or is Mavis Mawela working on their application as we speak? or is this bureaucrat lying?*); certificates have been abandoned by their owners (*or perhaps the applicants have yet to come in to claim them?*). Almost a failure, almost a success; almost attended to, almost abandoned. The condition of dereliction demonstrates that relating policies to practices demands an attention to bureaucratic temporalities.

Office infrastructure: Temporary residence permitting, second floor

Time, I suggest, is not an autonomous element within the bureaucratic landscape. Bureaucratic time takes shape through an assemblage of humans and non-humans, with specific spatial and material qualities. In this and the next section, I continue to sketch the material terrain of hope and skepticism. My approach pushes us to freeze questions of agency, intentionality, and structure at least momentarily in order to allow the materiality and indeterminacy of lived bureaucratic worlds to shine through and guide our ethnographic attention.⁵ I follow Matthew Hull (2012a) in thinking bureaucratic worlds through Latour's concept of "corporate bodies" or "object institutions" – networks of active humans and artifacts (Latour, 1999). A wide range of mundane technologies are vital to the operation of bureaucracies – stamps, computer databases, pens, accounting books, and so on. Files and documents have been among the most commonly studied. Authors have explained their significance to the operation and legitimization of bureaucracies (Blau, 1955; Feldman, 2008; Hull, 2012a); their capacity to produce certain types of bureaucratic subjects (Hornberger, 2011; Jacob, 2007; cf. Cabot, 2012); and their capacity to permit and preclude certain types of knowing (Dery, 1998; see Hull, 2012b and Riles, 2006 for excellent reviews of this literature). I extend these insights to consider *what* and *how* people know about documents' whereabouts: instead of looking exclusively at those moments when documents are engaged or put into circulation (Harper, 1998), I inquire into the significance of their disappearance and stagnation; and instead of focusing on documents alone (permit applications, in this case), I examine them in relation to the technologies that by turns facilitate, frustrate, or obscure their circulation.

Consider the cubby. Two floors above the PRP office, at temporary residence permitting (TRP), the cubby is crucial to the processing of an application, organizing the flow of hundreds of applications that pass through the office each week. The cubby is designed to accommodate applications. The application, with its numerous leaves of documentation aligned just so with a staple or paper clip to fit the cubby, cannot move through this office full of paperwork without an organizing

device such as the cubby. It is, otherwise, just paper. But while cubbies can make applications visible, they can also occlude. Just as laws generate transgression, and as certifications incite forgery, so too can the organizational tool create confusion. Cubbies can be used improperly, or variably across heterogeneous communities of practice. For example, the TRP office is full of cubbies, many of which are unlabeled but contain papers. If an application with a surname of Musenze is placed not in the "M" cubby, but in an unlabeled cubby used by some to store applications that need to be reviewed by one of the section managers, who knows when it might resurface?

The TRP consists of a hallway-turned waiting room, a small "submissions" room, a small "collections" room, and a large back room. After applicants submit their applications, they return 30 days later to collect their permit (or rejection letter). The collections room is roughly twenty-by-twenty feet, and contains three tight rows of wooden benches that applicants scoot down as each person at the front of the queue stands up to be served. A worn, particle-board counter separates clients from bureaucrats. The bureaucrats' side of the counter extends out into a large, cluttered open-plan back office. Applicants' view of this room, however, is blocked by a large set of cubbies facing away from the waiting room.

Work at the collections counter consists of taking an applicant's receipt and checking a series of cubbies according to the application's potential status as "accepted," "rejected," "queried" (i.e., for more information), or "flagged for inspection." In order to check a cubby for an application, the official pulls out the entire stack, brings it to a nearby table or props it up on a knee by resting a foot on a lower cubby hole. The official flips through them using the top, left-hand corner, near the staple or paper clip. Whether the application is found or not, this stack of applications goes back into the cubby with greater or lesser care. Because the application consists of so many different documents of so many different sizes, it can be difficult to properly neaten them into a stack. This means that the cubby, designed to generously accommodate an A4-size paper, can seem small upon reinsertion of the stack. On a few occasions, I witnessed papers poorly stapled or paper-clipped catching on the edges of the cubby and falling off, sometimes not to be recuperated.

The spatial segregation of bureaucrats and clients mediates their interaction visually and auditorily. Behind this wall of cubbies, obscured from the public waiting in the collections area, officials chat with their colleagues. They text-message friends, or lean up against the table to rest their feet. Officials sometimes use this screen to ignore applicants and control the pace of their work. Cubbies therefore hide more than applications; they hide officials. And yet, officials are often-times simply looking for the application. From the waiting room, one cannot tell. Laughter, work-related and unrelated banter, and even singing emit from behind these walls. Applicants sit: hopeful, skeptical, patient, impatient.

Cubbies, walls, and applications therefore constitute some of the material terrain upon which hope and skepticism develop. When applications stop moving – when they stagnate in cubbies, when cubbies hide applications from bureaucrats – they

have powerful effects. The clueless applicant becomes furious; the clueless bureaucrat tires of repeating herself; the work permit applicant is passed up for the job. Across counters, behind walls, through bars and windows, while they wait, bureaucrats and clients search for clues about the nature of their interaction. Bureaucrats scrutinize the applicant's face in an effort to protect themselves against the occasional fraudulent applicant. Clients listen as bureaucrats disappear into the next room, and ask bureaucrats to clarify their terse or listless statements. Persons on both sides of these counters and walls speculate and fabulate likely scenarios based upon facial expressions, race, gender, and other features in the scene. Bureaucrats, unable or unwilling to provide a full account of where a given application might be, issue curt answers to inquiring clients: "It's not finished yet. Come back in a week." Clients, some of whom have already waited an extra week, visibly strain themselves to interpret these abbreviated statements. *Is my application lost? Is it currently being reviewed? Is this bureaucrat trying to solicit a bribe?* Inured bureaucrats wonder yet again: *Does this client think I'm joking?* "I'm sorry," the official says. "You will have to come back in a week. Next please. NEXT!"

Form 20: TRP, second floor

In this final section, I describe an instance where dereliction is officially confirmed: the issuance of a "Form 20" permit. This occurs when the "translations" (Callon, 1986) that hold the client and the bureaucracy together begin to fail, when hope slides almost irretrievably into despair, possibility into failure. Although dereliction develops within material environments, it is held at bay by formal rules, regulations, and laws, as well as informal personal assurances. These discursive technologies, as we might term them, deny dereliction by asserting future action: "the application will be processed within 30 days." They illustrate that the possible disconnection and the possible connection implied by dereliction orbit practice: the derelict thing is always the site of a possible connection, and the law, rule, regulation, and personal assurance always risk spinning off into space, unfulfilled and unapplied. Confirmation of dereliction merely pulls the client back into orbit, however, as we shall see, leaving them waiting once again.

As noted above, permanent residence applicants awaiting the outcome of their application must be sure to keep their temporary residence permits up to date. These expire every 90 days, and cost 420 South African Rand (US\$60) at the time of research. Similar documentation is required for this application as is for that of permanent residence. The temporary residence application process takes 30 days from the time of submission, and applicants must submit their applications with more than 30 days to go on their visa or they will not be allowed to submit. If an applicant has less than 30 days left, they will be required to return to their country of origin (whether Botswana or Bangladesh) to obtain a new temporary residence permit. After submitting an application, the applicant is asked to return in 30 days to the collections counter with their receipt, during which time the Board (a group of upper-level managers) will review and approve the application, reject it, flag it

for inspection by the DHA's Inspectorate office, or query the applicant for more information.

A TRP official whom I will call Emily explained to me how things work at the collections counter: First, she takes a receipt from an applicant and checks the date to make sure that it is dated 30 or more days ago. If such a period has not elapsed, she turns the person away. If 30 days have elapsed, she seeks the application in the alphabetically organized "accepted" cubby. If it is not there, she checks the "queries" cubby, the "rejections" cubby, and finally the "in process" cubby (meaning the application has yet to be reviewed by the Board). If the application has been accepted, she takes it to the counter, gets the person's passport, and brings the passport and application to the stamping table, where another TRP official affixes the permit sticker and stamp. Unfortunately, these TRP applications are sometimes "missing" or "misplaced," to use officials' language. When an application cannot be found, Emily tells the applicant to return in one week. If it cannot be located after a second or third attempt, she will look a bit harder.

She walks me through an actual example. We grab a receipt from a client at the counter and look for his application. It is nowhere to be found – not in the accepted, rejected, nor the queried cubbies. She tells the applicant that it is not here yet, and that he should come back in a week. He is not happy. He has been here to collect his permit twice already. With less than a week to go before his current permit expires, he is nervous about becoming undocumented. We check the logbook where Inspectorate officers are supposed to note the names of those applications they pick up for investigation. Nothing there. We check a stack of those that have returned from the Inspectorate. Nothing. She worries that the application may have wound up in the archives, where completed applications are sent. The archives are a filing nightmare and it takes typically 10 days for the manager of the archives to check on requests. Emily looks for clues on the Movement Control System, a national database that is supposed to keep record of the entry and exit of all non-South Africans in the country, including notes on their visa status or "black-listing." Nothing is posted in this case except the applicant's entry at a Botswana border post. The man will have to resubmit all of his application paperwork again, less the application fee, and the file will be processed immediately. He is not happy. Because his permit will expire within a week, Emily asks her boss to issue a temporary extension permit called a "Form 20" to legalize the man while he puts together his paperwork.

Hope here has ceded to skepticism, care to abandonment, prospection to retrospection. The Form 20 represents an official recognition of dereliction. It acknowledges the breakdown of procedure and the loss of an application. Previously, the application was connected only by an official's promise, a rule, a regulation, or a procedure that dictated:

"An application shall be reviewed and a decision given within 30 days of its submission";

"Come back in 30 days to pick up your visa at the Collections counter";

“Come back in one week”; or,

“If the application cannot be found in the ‘accepted’ cubby, check the ‘rejected’ cubby.”

By officially certifying the application as lost, however, the application paradoxically is recuperated, and, along with it the applicant, reconnected for now to the South African state, to legitimate residency, to his application. The applicant’s retrospection is reoriented toward prospection once again and the status quo has been reinstated. We have gone forward in time and yet come full circle. In a sense, then, certified dereliction is impossible: to confirm dereliction is also to bury or suppress it by reinserting the application into a relationship of care.

Conclusion

Reorienting bureaucracy studies from a retrospective analysis of outcomes to a prospective analysis of the states of possibility encountered during bureaucratic waiting illuminates bureaucratic time and bureaucratic power in new, non-normative ways. The concept of “dereliction” can help in this effort. It helps to reframe the relationship between policy and practice by slowing down our efforts to compare them, highlighting the limit areas where success and failure blur, where prospection slips into retrospection. It shows us that bureaucratic time can be simultaneously linear and circular, fixing a destination on the horizon that by turns approaches and recedes from view. Bureaucracies are powerful not only because they control or capture time but also because they are able to orient people toward the future. Even though its effects can be profound, this is a tenuous kind of power; one that must be cultivated through “future-work,” which generates hope through mundane bureaucratic procedures. Eventually, the “translations” (Callon, 1986) that hold together participants in the bureaucratic encounter begin to fail as time draws clients and their applications apart from the discursive technologies (e.g., rules, regulations, personal assurances) that give them temporal direction. At such a stage, DHA bureaucrats are forced to acknowledge and officially certify dereliction through the Form 20 permit. This permit paradoxically suppresses dereliction, reducing the derelict thing to an ambiguous condition of near-attention and near-abandonment. Applicants are oriented, once again, toward the future. Thus, I show that, in addition to structuring practice (or not), rules, regulations, and laws *make claims* on future actions, precluding the exposure of dereliction for the time being.

The objective of this article has been to describe one way in which time shapes bureaucratic practice. But bureaucracies are organized along multiple temporalities, no doubt varying across cultural and political contexts. A rich literature in migration studies, for example, demonstrates that migrants’ experiences of immigration bureaucracies are shaped by the specificity of their legal and documentary forms, as well as by the racial, gender, and national imaginaries particular to that context (Cabot, 2012, 2013; Cheng, 2010; Chu, 2010; Mountz, 2011; for migration

in South Africa, see Amit, 2011; Landau, 2010; Wa Kabwe-Segatti and Landau, 2008). Differences also could surely be found between the temporality of an immigration bureaucracy and that of a domestic social assistance bureaucracy – not to mention between that of street-level, public service-provision bureaucracies and of industrial or military bureaucracies. More work needs to be done to describe how bureaucratic time varies across context, as well as how various kinds of bureaucratic time are interwoven with political-economic events and processes “outside” the bureaucracy (Heyman, 1995). Crucially, however, such work will need to narrate bureaucratic worlds from the perspective of bureaucrats themselves, and not exclusively their clients (Heyman, 2004). One contribution of this article has been to do just that, showing the rich possibilities in the ethnography of bureaucracy for understanding the technologies and temporalities that shape interactions between applicants, bureaucrats, and the state.

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Notes

1. I spent time at five separate offices. Four of these are located in Johannesburg: Permanent Residence Permitting (PRP), Temporary Residence Permitting (TRP), Inspectorate, and Refugee Reception. The fifth is a border post, located on South Africa’s border with Lesotho. My analysis in this paper concerns primarily the PRP and TRP, although observations from all five offices inform my general perspective on the DHA and bureaucratic practice. The PRP and TRP offices are located in the same building on Harrison St. in downtown Johannesburg. The PRP accepts permanent residence applications, sends them to Head Office in Pretoria for processing, and issues certificates or rejection notifications to applicants once the application has been returned to the PRP. The TRP office is located on a different floor; it accepts and processes applications for a range of work, tourist, and medical permits. Applicants come from across the globe, the most being from other parts of Africa. At these offices, I shadowed officials from behind the counter, observing their interactions with clients, colleagues, supervisors, information technologies, and laws and regulations. Spending anywhere between 10 and 20 h per week at these offices, I spoke at length with officials about

policies, DHA management, training, clients, and a range of other matters both professional and personal. Toward the end of the research period, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a diverse group of over 60 officials working at various levels within the hierarchy.

2. For reviews of the anthropological literature on time, see Gell (1992) and Munn (1992). Also see Bourdieu (1977), Peebles (2010), Munn (1986), and Derrida (1992) for discussions of the analogous significance of time in commodity and gift exchange.
3. Although the application can be downloaded from the Department website, officials would not accept this online version. Reasons for this were not fully clear to me. A few officials suggested that they did not trust that this online application was identical to the one that is supplied by the office, while others stated that they were simply following the rules.
4. Department of Home Affairs, <http://www.home-affairs.gov.za/index.php/permanent-res> (accessed 14 February 2013).
5. Suspending questions of agency in powerful institutions is politically risky. And yet we know that the concept of agency-as-self-sovereignty is deficient, being descendant of militaristic notions of state rule (Berlant, 2011). It can also obscure the haphazard qualities – the “slight surprise” (Latour, 1999) – of action. Moreover, our perspective on bureaucratic agency is clouded by dogged stereotypes of the bureaucrat as either self-interested, knowing, and obstructionist (i.e., all agency) or machine-like, ignorant, and indifferent (i.e., all structure). Provided we do not lose our bearings on questions of power altogether, I suggest that decentering agency might allow us to see otherwise occluded forms of bureaucratic power.

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Author Biography

Colin Hoag is a PhD Candidate in Cultural Anthropology at UC Santa Cruz. His current research investigates cultural and ecological transformations taking place in the Southern African country of Lesotho, where an economic reliance on labor export has given way to a reliance on water export. He is also a PhD Student in Biological Sciences at Aarhus University in Denmark, where he is affiliated with the interdisciplinary research programme titled, *AURA: Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene*.