In the out tray

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Ben Kafka
THE DEMON OF WRITING
Powers and failures of paperwork
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Insignificance’, Roland Barthes once remarked, “is the true locus of significance.” In this compelling new book, the media theorist Ben Kafka claims paperwork as a site of precisely such significant insignificance. From bookkeeping to form-filling to filing, most people see paperwork as something that gets in the way of proper work, or has to be arranged around it. But The Demon of Writing demonstrates how clerical labour has crucially shaped politics and society since the eighteenth century.

The book begins by defining paperwork as “all of those documents produced in response to a demand – real or imagined – by the state”. This initial description signals Kafka’s preoccupations: his project blends political history with the more “imaginary” realm of psychoanalysis. Hence, borrowing from Judith Butler’s The Psychic Life of Power (1997), he specifies his subject as the “psychic life of paperwork”, meaning the ways in which the medium merges the inner world of the unconscious with the outer one of imposed social control. On this model, paperwork intersects as much with our innermost desires as with the workings of government.

As a case in point, Kafka cites the story of the French civil servant Edmée-Étienne Morizot, who in 1788 unjustly lost his job at the Ministry of Finance – and later, it seems, lost his mind. Petitioning the National Assembly for compensation, Morizot became embittered and embittered by bureaucratic requests for “supporting documents”. As a result, he proved as prone as we are today to “the fantasy that an omnipotent but benevolent authority will intervene”, and thus that the state might magically “satisfy” the desires of its subjects. To begin with, Morizot just wanted his job back. But by the end “this basic need had transformed itself into a complicated demand for recognition by the new state”. So Morizot’s plight put paperwork centre stage, at the scene of the citizen’s psychic investment in a shifting political sphere, “a world of privilege becoming a world of rights”.

In this respect, the French Revolution could be said to have heralded a “new ethos of paperwork”, which Kafka portrays as the procedural foundation of the modern state. But such foundations are often far from stable – consider the infamous “dimpled chads” of Florida’s voting ballots in 2000. Be it misread, mislaid, “overdue or undelivered”, paperwork is profoundly unpredictable. And in this sense the state, like us, has historically been “both founded and confounded by its encounters with paperwork”.

As proof of paperwork’s volatility, Kafka recounts a rich assortment of bureaucratic blunders, tracing what happens when formal procedures fail or foster unforeseen outcomes. In 1794, towards the end of the Terror, the actors and actresses of the Comédie-Française were saved from summary execution when the very files that had authorized their accusation abruptly vanished. They owed their lives to one Charles-Hippolyte Labussière, a lowly clerk who had smuggled their papers into the baths, soaked them until they were “almost paste, and then launched them, in small pellets, through the window into the river”.

Labussière’s lesson, Kafka construes, is that while on the one hand “paperwork synchronizes the state’s rhythms”, every so often it inadvertently “destabilizes its structures”. In other words, if paperwork is a condition of possibility for state power, it is one which sometimes paradoxically renders such power impossible. In Labussière’s case, the files that facilitated the functioning of the security state were what revealed its vulnerability: from then on, “not only was power resistible; it was water soluble”.

This sort of instability was soon intuited by Saint-Just, who said of the proliferation of paperwork during the early days of the First Republic that “the demon of writing is waging war against us; we are unable to govern”. His remark reveals paperwork’s place at the crossroads between what sociologists would call “structure and agency”. Administration may be the medium through which a government’s edicts are exercised, but, by its nature, it also engenders new opportunities for escape. In this respect, paperwork is “refractive”, argues Kafka: “power and knowledge inevitably change the speed and shape when they enter it”. When they do, they produce the prospect of their own opposition.

The Demon of Writing delivers a witty and rich history of the faltering rise of bureaucracy since the French Revolution. But beyond its many amusing anecdotes, it also makes a polemical point. Kafka’s stories of clerical error cleverly show how theories of the state should more closely consider our everyday experiences of its “failure”. And, as most people will appreciate, paperwork provides a perfect point of departure for such an analysis.

Of course, Kafka is not the only scholar to have taken a “technical turn” in recent times: Bruno Latour has explored legal theory’s embodiment in files and data; for example. Kafka could be said to have gone one step better. His point is that paperwork necessitates not only a theory of practice, but one of what Freud called parapraxis: of unconscious slips and shocking upshots. Whether we’re powerful or powerless, the practical world is one into which we project our impractical needs, and where “we never get what we want”. In pinpointing this, Ben Kafka’s book brings unpredictability back into the picture. And it does so with a panache that makes us appreciate anew our most “insignificant” acts.