

Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan

By Matthew S. Hull

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In the electronic age, documents appear to have escaped their paper confinement. But we are still surrounded by flows of paper with enormous consequences. In the planned city of Islamabad, order and disorder are produced through the ceaseless inscription and circulation of millions of paper artifacts among bureaucrats, politicians, property owners, villagers, imams (prayer leaders), businessmen, and builders. What are the implications of such a thorough paper mediation of relationships among people, things, places, and purposes? *Government of Paper* explores this question in the routine yet unpredictable realm of the Pakistani urban bureaucracy, showing how the material forms of postcolonial bureaucratic documentation produce a distinctive political economy of paper that shapes how the city is constructed, regulated, and inhabited. Files, maps, petitions, and visiting cards constitute the enduring material infrastructure of more ephemeral classifications, laws, and institutional organizations. Matthew S. Hull develops a fresh approach to state governance as a material practice, explaining why writing practices designed during the colonial era to isolate the government from society have become a means of participation in it.

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Editorial Review

Review

“A must read.”
(Mohammad A. QadeerMohammad A. Qadeer *Dawn.com* 2913-01-09)

From the Inside Flap

“Drawing inspiration from actor-network theory, science studies, and semiotics, this brilliant book makes us completely rethink the workings of bureaucracy as analyzed by Max Weber and James Scott. Matthew Hull demonstrates convincingly how the materiality of signs truly matters for understanding the projects of ‘the state.’” - Katherine Verdery, author of *What was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*

“We are used to studies of roads and rails as central material infrastructure for the making of modern states. But what of records, the reams and reams of paper that inscribe the state-in-making? This brilliant book inquires into the materiality of information in colonial and postcolonial Pakistan. This is a work of signal importance for our understanding of the everyday graphic artifacts of authority.” - Bill Maurer, author of *Mutual Life, Limited: Islamic Banking, Alternative Currencies, Lateral Reason*

"This is an excellent and truly exceptional ethnography. Hull presents a theoretically sophisticated and empirically rich reading that will be an invaluable resource to scholars in the field of Anthropology and South Asian studies. The author’s focus on bureaucracy, “corruption," writing systems and urban studies (Islamabad) in a post-colonial context makes for a unique ethnographic engagement with contemporary Pakistan. In addition, Hull’s study is a refreshing voice that breaks the mold of current representation of Pakistan through the security studies paradigm." - Kamran Asdar Ali, Director, South Asia Institute, University of Texas

About the Author

Matthew S. Hull is assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Michigan.

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