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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 *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*

"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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"A slim, sprightly, acerbic attack on capitalism's love affair with bureaucracy." Cory Doctorow, *BoingBoing* "[The Utopia of Rules] should offer a challenge to us all. Should we just accept this bureaucracy as inevitable? Or is there a way to get rid of all those hours spent

listening to bad call-centre music? Do policemen, academics, teachers and doctors really need to spend half their time filling in forms? Or can we imagine another world?"

• Gillian Tett, Financial Times

“Graeber wants us to unshackle ourselves from the limits imposed by bureaucracy, precisely so we can actually get down to openly and creatively arguing about our collective future. In other words, yelling at the book is not just part of the pleasure of reading it. It’s part of the point.”

• NPR

“Graeber’s most interesting claim...is that our expressed hostility toward bureaucracy is at least partly disingenuous: that these thickets of rules and regulations are a source, to quote from his subtitle, of ‘secret joys’ for most of us.”

• Oliver Burkeman, The Guardian (UK)

“Something like an intellectual hike led by an eccentric guide: a winding set of anecdotes, schematics, juxtapositions, and assertions... He is a master of opening up thought and stimulating debate.”

• Slate

“Thought-provoking.”

• Boston Globe

“What intense pleasure this book gave me, despite the dull topic: bureaucracy.”

• Peter Richardson, The National Memo

“[A] fizzing, fabulous firecracker of a book | Our contemporary bureaucrats are revealed, in fact, as none other than you and me, forever administering and marketing ourselves.”

• The Literary Review

“Anthropologist Graeber is one of our wildest thinkers (see *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*), and in this book, he takes on the topic of bureaucracy, arguing that what we think of as the root of our civilization — capitalism, technology, rules and regulations — may just be what’s keeping us in chains.”

• Flavorwire, 10 Must Read Books for February

“Inspiring and full of surprising facts | This is ultimately a book about how the systems we invent come to appear natural. We treat our world as though it is a fact, but actually, we produce it. This is not a new idea, but it’s one of the most hopeful we’ve got. It opens the door to change.”

• Maclean’s (Canada)

“A thoroughly argued, funny, and surprising new book.”

• Jonathon Sturgeon, Flavorwire

“Persuasive... Graeber’s aim was to start a conversation on the boondoggles and benefits of bureaucracy. In that regard, he has ticked all the right boxes.”

• The Observer (UK)

“Packed with provocative observations and left-field scholarship. Ranging from witty analysis of comic-book narratives to penetrating discussion of world-changing technologies that haven’t actually appeared, it demystifies some of the ruling shibboleths of our time. Modern bureaucracy embodies a view of the world as being essentially rational, but the roots of this vision, Graeber astutely observes, go all the way back to the ancient Pythagoreans.”

• John Gray, The Guardian (UK)

“Admirable and convincing...In his irrepressible, ruminative way, Graeber stands in the comic tradition of Walt

Whitman, archy and mehitabel and James Thurber. This is the chorus with which to laugh the trousers off corporate management." [Times Higher Education \(UK\)](#) "Interrogates aspects of bureaucratic modernity that are normally unexamined causes of annoyance | Stylish and witty." [Steven Poole, New Statesman \(UK\)](#) "Graeber is an American anthropologist with a winning combination of talents: he's a startlingly original thinker...able to convey complicated ideas with wit and clarity." [The Telegraph \(UK\)](#) "A sharp, oddly sympathetic and highly readable account of how big government works or doesn't work, depending on your point of view." [Kirkus Reviews](#) Praise for Debt: The First 5,000 Years: "Written in a brash, engaging style, the book is also a philosophical inquiry into the nature of debt where it came from and how it evolved." [The New York Times Book Review](#) "An absolutely indispensable and enormous treatise on the history of money and its relationship to inequality in society." [Cory Doctorow, BoingBoing](#) "[A]n engaging book. Part anthropological history and part provocative political argument, it's a useful corrective to what passes for contemporary conversation about debt and the economy." [Jesse Singal, Boston Globe](#) "This timely and accessible book would appeal to any reader interested in the past and present culture surrounding debt, as well as broad-minded economists." [Library Journal](#)

DAVID GRAEBER teaches anthropology at the London School of Economics. He is the author of Debt: The First 5,000 Years, Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value, Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar, Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology, Possibilities: Essays on Hierarchy, Rebellion, and Desire, and Direct Action: An Ethnography. He has written for Harper's, The Nation, The Baffler, The Wall Street Journal, The Washington Post, and The New Left Review.

I thought it was a very good synopsis on beauracracy we live with every day, private and public. It gets you thinking on how democratic control and ownership might improve or eliminate much of the scourge. However I think it is light on how beauracracy is something we will have to live with democratic or not and that it is a part of our society for better or worse.

Mandatory reading for anyone who wants to understand why we are all basically prisoners of our civilization, we can't escape...

This is an amazing read that takes the reader on a true intellectual journey. Graeber shows why he maybe one of the best public intellectuals of his time. The sections on the symbolic violence described perfectly my feelings on the subject and its impact on society

A sparkling collection of previous and new material about our love/hate relationship with bureaucracy in Graeber's trademark witty style. More focused, less dense and better edited than Debt was.

The Utopia of Rules by David Graeber is an engaging riff on the theme of bureaucracy and the BS people think about it. "De-regulation," of finances, Graeber points out, creates more rules, paperwork, and bureaucrats, apparently because what happens is not the equivalent of firing a bunch of factory safety inspectors, but rather the employment of enough bureaucrats to redirect control of wealth from mid-sized companies to giant conglomerates. Yet, just as people imagine criminals to be mostly black or violent, or war to be philanthropic or necessary, or estate taxes to be about family farms, or voter fraud to be impacting elections, or elections to have any value that could possibly be hurt by voter fraud, or a minimum wage to eliminate jobs, or corporate trade agreements to not eliminate jobs, or guns to make us safer, or prisons to "correct" something, or wealth to trickle down, or small-time foreign thugs to constitute a graver threat than a McDonald's diet, what matters is a fiction well told, not any facts. Career advancement in a bureaucracy, Graeber writes, is based not so much on merit as on the loyalty exhibited by a willingness to pretend that it's based on merit. If you play along with the collective delusion, you're rewarded. "Globalization" is not about tearing down borders, but rather trapping people behind militarized borders within which public supports can be denied and workers can be compelled to work for little or nothing -- in other words, a species of bureaucratization. The effort to create a truly borderless and fair world is known as "anti-globalization." The "free market" means heavier bureaucracy, and an expansion of those areas of life that come under the control of state violence. This was the story of Russia's transition from state to private economics, Graeber writes: more bureaucrats, not fewer. When police bring law and order, we picture them turning a violent situation non-violent. In fact, they are not involved in most violent crime, and mostly show up to nonviolent situations which they turn violent. You have a much higher chance of being killed by police than by the terrorists they are now mostly imagined as combatting. When someone tells you to be "realistic" about such supposed fantasies as peace or justice, they are not telling you to recognize how things are, as they and you may imagine they are,

but rather they are telling you to acknowledge the violence by which the state can impose its will no matter how stupidly it might choose to do so. "Real" in this usage comes from the Spanish real meaning royal or belonging to the king, not the Latin res or thing. It is the royal usage that created such phrases as "real property" or "real estate." The point is not that a house truly exists, but that the king ultimately owns it. To "be realistic" about violence simply means to be violent about violence. After all, we all know violence exists; some of us choose not to multiply it. Cutting taxes on "job creators" doesn't create any jobs, just the reverse. With more wealth, they do things like taking their pay in stock options, and then using extra money that could have gone into new hires or raises or research for stock buybacks. The result is a weaker economy inhabited by people convinced it's both a stronger economy and an inevitable economy against which one need not waste any energy struggling for change. Why don't we have robots doing our factory work and house work? Why don't we have useful technological advances on the scale of previous eras? Graeber writes that the most immediate reason is that 95% of robotics funding has gone through the Pentagon which has no interest in such matters and is more interested in destructive inventions like killer drones. In addition, robots are understood as job killers rather than time savers because we offer no one a guaranteed income even if they don't need to work. We begin with the requirement that everyone work no matter what, and then figure out stuff they can do to fulfill that requirement -- such as trying all day to get us to switch from one giant phone company to another. Another problem is innovative corporate culture that kills innovation by investing in only sure things, requiring everyone to invest time in PR, and multiplying bureaucracy. People are told to cling to the American freedom of private health insurance companies as an act of rebellion against government bureaucracy, even as the insurance corporations create vastly more bureaucracy, paperwork, sickness, and death. We don't notice bureaucracy, Graeber believes, because it has mushroomed. The average American will spend 6 months of their life waiting for stoplights to change and some larger length of time filling out forms. We don't notice bureaucracy, think we despise it, and secretly love it, Graeber thinks -- love it because it is the enemy of unpredictable and improvisational play, which we've been conditioned to believe is dangerous. Of course, the opposite is true. The preceding is a sampling of Graeber's book and my thoughts on it, not a summary. I urge you to dive into it yourself. It's a book that intentionally raises many large questions. A couple of small ones stand out as flaws, however: 1) Why in the world does the author keep his money in Bank of America? 2) Why does he imagine that the "War on Terror" has ended? The whole point of a war on terror is that it's not endable, as terror can never be eliminated. Nor of course can it be outdone in terrorizing by anything moreso than war.

This book will change how you view all commercial, political, governmental, institutional relationships.

Graeber offers a fascinating take on what society has become and why we have so many rules. His critiques of the current system are scathing and hit the nail on the head. A must read for any would-be anarchist.

I really love Graeber's sensibility and the way he makes deep and compelling explanations of aspects and operations of modern society that we either take for granted (in this case corporate and government bureaucracies) or simply don't bother to try and explain (money and debt in his previous book on the subject) While not as comprehensive or fleshed as his masterwork on debt, this book still contains many solid and compelling arguments, such as how the gutting of the US public service and labour unions in the 80s actually created the problem of workers "going postal" since working conditions had deteriorated so badly, or the role of fantasy novels as a type of mythic justification of the modern bureaucratic capitalist state in the final chapter. Other points about the ways that bureaucracy have stifled academic and scientific creativity, and the way that bureaucratic stupidity is an expression of unequal social relations I found harder to understand and wish they had been more fully explored. Still a really solid book, and my favourite of Graeber's since Debt.

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