The Managerial and Organizational role of Scribes as Bureaucrats in Ancient Egypt: Human vs Non-Human Machines and Obsessive Consumption as Dehumanization of Individuals

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Abstract

Scribes in ancient Egypt functioned as the ancient equivalent of a bureaucrat or white-collar worker. The social organization structure in ancient Egypt has been compared to other vertical structures in modern states. This organization, like other bureaucracies, can be interpreted as a supra-human machine where each human worker is a cog in it. However, this repurposing of human labor as specialized parts for a larger machine might have resulted in a negative-reinforcement cycle of increased materialist consumption and human alienation to feed into a separate materialist consumption machine. We will study the impacts of supra-human systems in the motivations and efficiency of our economy and daily lives.

Scribes as Bureaucrats

In the text[1], even though the government described is in ancient Egypt, many ideas seem to remain valid in our modern world. The state, in current western societies, is usually lobbied by the most powerful corporations or even by individuals, but it also attempts to satisfy the needs of the poor, and solve social and economic problems from a centralized perspective.

In the text, interests were partially aligned between the elite and a large sector of the population: “Although [the ancient government’s] purpose was to manipulate the economic environment for the benefit of the elite, in so doing, the benefit was incidentally spread to a significant sector of the population. This was achieved essentially through taxation to bring in resources and then through their redistribution as rations to an element of the population - probably a large one - engaged temporarily or permanently on work for the state.” This sounds a lot like the safety net that most governments are using, except that it functions more like infrastructure projects as a form of welfare.[2]

The ancient Egyptian megamachine was also plagued with bureaucracy. For example, the scribe had to use spreadsheets to control and account for all the rations that workers received in “a table of daily income written in an early style of hieratic (...) we can recognize instantly a sensible tabular format, ruled in red and black ink”.[3] It is very interesting to see how the tables they used resemble our current documents to such a great extent. This could be proof that our modern societies are not that different from theirs.[4]

Security was also one of the main topics that society (and the government) was concerned with: “The great fuss that was made over sealing, including the repeated inspection of seals, was a psychological ploy. It concentrated the minds of those responsible on a specific point of security, laid security open to bureaucratic control, and the link between sealings and the keeper of the seal became a bond of responsibility”.[5] The extent of the similarities between our current state and the one of ancient Egypt is surprising, and it makes us wonder whether there are any large changes in the social organization yet to be attempted, or if we are merely repeating past ideas, with simple rebranding.[6]

Scribes did not only represent bureaucrats: they were every white-collar employee in ancient Egypt. For example, the job they did in construction or other areas was similar to an

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[1] Saldarini, Anthony J. Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.
[2] Saldarini, Anthony J. Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.
[3] Saldarini, Anthony J. Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.
[4] Dolbilov, Mikhail. "Russification and the Bureaucratic Mind in the Russian Empire's Northwestern Region in the 1860s." Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 5.2 (2004).
[5] Saldarini, Anthony J. Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.
[6] Dolbilov, Mikhail. "Russification and the Bureaucratic Mind in the Russian Empire's Northwestern Region in the 1860s." Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 5.2 (2004).

engineer or technician: “they or their superiors would already know the maximum capacity of the individual silos, even if they were circular, by calculation”.[7]

After all, many American industries flourished via government spending, such as silicon-based computers (as a spin-off of space and war research). In ancient Egypt, “we must recognize that (...) the central direction of resources committed to massive labor-intensive projects was in earlier times the great engine of growth, creating many of the world’s civilizations.” and we could argue that, in many cases, centralization is the only way to achieve impactful large-scale projects like the pyramids or spaceships.[8]

A Gear in the Machine

In modern societies, we tend to strongly differentiate humans from technology or machines, but in theory, many “machines” are made up by humans. For example, governments, institutions, companies, countries, organizations, can all be thought of as machines. Without those entities, society would function quite differently. Many characteristics of social order “scale, asymmetry, durability, power, division of labor, role distribution, and hierarchy”, are necessary for everyday life and “are impossible even to define without bringing in socialized nonhumans”.[9] “The extension of networks of power in the electrical industry, in telecommunications, in transportation”, would be impossible to even think of without the “massive mobilization of material entities”.[10]

The problem with these systems that convert people into a gear of a greater mechanism is the “alienation” and “dehumanization” that people experience. However, “industry transfers to non-humans the management of people learned in the imperial megamachine”.[11] Organizing people into systems is not a new phenomenon, but replacing them by other tools is.[12]

With industrialization and computers, these human-machines (institutions, organizations) have converted into different entities which do not operate with people to the same extent they used to. Humans have now been replaced with robotic or computerized tools. Industry allows “non-humans the possibility of being related to one another in an assembly of actants that we call a machine or an automaton”: a set of pieces or mechanisms that work together to produce value, ”which is submitted to regular laws that can be measured through instruments and accounting procedures”.[13]

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[7] Saldarini, Anthony J. Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.
[8] Saldarini, Anthony J. Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society: A Sociological Approach. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001.
[9] Latour, Bruno. "Pragmatogonies: A mythical account of how humans and nonhumans swap properties." American behavioral scientist 37.6 (1994).
[10] Latour, Bruno. "Pragmatogonies: A mythical account of how humans and nonhumans swap properties." American behavioral scientist 37.6 (1994).
[11] Latour, Bruno. "Pragmatogonies: A mythical account of how humans and nonhumans swap properties." American behavioral scientist 37.6 (1994).
[12] Dolbilov, Mikhail. "Russification and the Bureaucratic Mind in the Russian Empire's Northwestern Region in the 1860s." Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 5.2 (2004).
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Although some people think that most of our problems are due to subjectivity in institutions, and others blame corruption, machines or tools can not always eliminate the flaws that humans have. Many scholars thought that “the more we grew the more distant objectivity and subjectivity would become, thus creating a future radically different from our past”.[14] Machines and non-human entities have existed long ago and have not solved these problems.

Consumer culture

This text approaches western consumer culture from a historical and economic perspective. It treats socialist ideology and propaganda as “conspiratorial theories of mass deception” where conspirators only analyzed society and events from the supply side of the market. It claims it was “a study of the producers, stylists, and critics of a hegemonic consumer ideal” and not an inquiry into “patterns of consumption” or the “lives of ordinary consumers”.[15]

Some time later, the “supply-side and hegemonic interpretation of consumer culture has been shaken” and lead to a “debate over the origins of industrial capitalism in the west”.[16]

Although consumption is not new phenomena, it has been encouraged by the cold war, as a way to differentiate capitalist from socialist societies. This is an important factor because once socialism ceased to be an important player in international politics, capitalist countries such as the United States fell into crisis, unemployment became the norm, and capitalism stopped being a symbol of wealth and freedom.[17]

Another interesting topic the text touches on is the “hedonist culture of mass consumption” where individuals seek gratification in the products they buy.[18] Human wants are unlimited and are never satisfied.[19] Fueled by advertising, high salaries, and entrepreneurship, consumers are constantly encouraged to buy and consume more. In the past, “only England presented the right mix of ingredients [for a consumer society]: fluid social structure, rising wages, an emulative bourgeoisie, and its servants”. However, with new technologies, in the present day, certain consumer goods have become extremely cheap and they are not a luxury anymore. Really poor families make the choice to spend money on TVs instead of using savings

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[14] Latour, Bruno. "Pragmatogonies: A mythical account of how humans and nonhumans swap properties." American behavioral scientist 37.6 (1994).
[15] Agnew, Jean-Christophe. "Coming up for air: consumer culture in historical perspective." Consumption and the World of Goods. Routledge, 2013.
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[19] O’Shaughnessy, John, and Nicholas Jackson O’Shaughnessy. "Marketing, the consumer society and hedonism." European Journal of Marketing 36.5/6 (2002).

for longer-term investments. The lowest classes have to be satisfied with “window-shopping”.[20] It is not the actual value in the object that matters to consumers, but imaginary feelings that they assign to them.[21] The “delaying of gratification and the suppression of emotion work together to create a rich and powerful imaginative life within the individual”, which is needed for a modern consumer.[22] The more alienated a worker becomes in his job (which happens in order for the company to become more efficient) the more that worker needs “escapism” and “wish fulfillment” in the short term, which leads to a vicious cycle of poverty in the lowest classes.[23]

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