**Public Service Iconography: desks, dress, diploma and decor**

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**Abstract**

Photographer Jan Banning (2008) presents images of bureaucrats seated at their desks that confound any stereotype. As they stare grimly at the camera, we glimpse something of their office. They are dressed, sometimes formally but more often casually. Their desks are variously orderly and chaotic. These images suggest formality and informality, uniformity and individuality in ways that ask questions of our idea of a bureaucrat. Power and authority are represented by desks, uniforms and certificates. Their position, as representatives of the State holding office in a Weberian sense, is underlined by pictures of current and former Presidents and other national figures. These are sometimes contrasted by photos of teddy bears, a bag full of garbage or calendars of topless women. At first glance, character and humour appear rarely. On closer scrutiny, in the images of dogs that look like their owners and of cowboy boots, many reveal the individuals, with different tastes and preferences, who willingly – at least in the photo - take on the characteristics of their stereotypes. Drawing, in particular, on Herzfeld´s (1993) perspectives on bureaucracy as a symbolic, social system, we question the stereotypes represented both of individual bureaucrats and of national bureaucracies. We ask whether there are deeper consistencies and themes running through the album, a uniformity of difference?

**Keywords:** bureaucrat(ic)s; public servants; power; authority; representations.

**The *Bureaucratics* Project**

The project *Bureaucratics*, by Dutch photographer Jan Banning, consists of a photo album (2008), a book in Dutch on the experiences of making the project (Tinnemans and Banning 2008) and a traveling exhibition including 50 images of civil servants in eight countries: Bolivia, China, France, India, Liberia, Russia, the United States, and the Yemen. Banning worked with the writer Will Tinnemans, who interviewed the bureaucrats as each photoshoot was set up. He also ensured that the bureaucrats could not tidy up their offices before the photos were taken in some effort to show what would confront a local citizen when entering the office. Further, the images are all taken from the same height, using the same format and all bureaucrats are positioned behind a desk, which were always positioned parallel to the horizontal edges of the frame. This was done to mark the boundaries of the civil servant and the citizens as well as to mirror the position that the bureaucrat would take up, when receiving a citizen. According to Banning (2008), the images are to be seen as examples of how states proclaim their power and the authority of their bureaucrats through evidence of position and rank, as well as more personal details. The empirical point of departure of our analysis is the album, which begins with a text explaining, among other things, the bureaucratic obstacles faced by the photographer and the writer of the project in various countries and providing a brief introduction to each country. Subsequently, the images are presented country by country and, finally, the last pages of the book contain smaller versions of the images with a brief text stating the name, date of birth, occupation and monthly salary of the bureaucrat as well as the region or municipality in which he/she works and the average working hours of the country. A few texts include a bit of additional information on the bureaucrat or the image, and in some cases there are further details in the book that accompanies the album (Tinnemans and Banning 2008). Should the readers of this chapter not have access to the photo book, the full collection of images can be viewed on the website included in the list of references.

Many of the images in the album present the President, the flag or some other symbol of the state in front of or behind the bureaucrats at their desks. One striking example (photo B03/2007 in Banning, 2008) is of a French official at her desk with a memorial naming those from the town who lost their lives in the First World War. These symbols of authority are further supplemented by other sources of formal power appropriate to the office. The individual public servant, staring back at the camera, is both insignificant as an individual and, at the same time, has these powerful legitimating devices to draw upon. A citizen is presented with both a human and with the state, a state-agent or citizen-agent in the formulation of Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2000). And in most cases, these officials are also equipped with their key instrument, a file. While we may be familiar with stereotypes of bureaucracy and of public servants, Banning’s volume of images offers an opportunity to consider Herzfeld’s (1993) assertion that we ‘assume that their national bureaucrats have certain characteristics that exaggerate the worst traits of “national character”’ (ibid:80). And at first glance, we can see something in this. There are patterns that might fit with some of our stereotypes. The US images are of large, even overweight, figures, squeezing behind their desks. The French all appear to be working in a house, slouched at their desks. The Russians stare sternly, forebodingly back at the camera. But do these tell us any more than just what we want to see? For, if we examine each image from the same country, we observe differences and divergences from the national stereotype. This is to be expected. However, if we gather them together by function (local government workers, police officers or tax collectors, for example), are there other themes to be seen that might undermine simple certainties and conclusions? And in many ways, each stands alone, worthy of close attention in their own right.

For the purposes of this chapter, we have selected ten images that, to our eyes, speak to some of the grand narratives of bureaucracy and public service: *representatives of the State* (Herzfeld 1993; Scott 1998; Weber 1978), *records* (Latour 2010; Riles 2006), *adjudication* (Weber 1978; Lipsky 1980), *authority* (Weber 1978, Bauman 1989) and *legitimacy* (Weber 1978, du Gay 2000, 2001, 2005, 2008; Herzfeld 1992; Lipsky 1980). The selected images are not peculiar or outliers among those in the album. Close attention to the other images would reveal similar points and themes to those we explore below. In discussing the ten we have chosen, we present them as pairs to both show the apparent differences but also the underlying connections across all eight of the countries covered in the album. In that sense, while acknowledging the national or cultural flavor of the images, we look beyond the national stereotypes to focus more on the generic features of the offices and bureaucrats portrayed.

**Representatives of the State**

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE Legend: ©Banning, 2008

The position of bureaucrats as representatives of a larger whole, the State, is underlined by numerous pictures of present and past rulers or historic persons linking the offices, in the Weberian sense (Weber 1978), to society. One of the most striking is, perhaps, a female bureaucrat from the Yemen (photo 35/2006, Banning 2008), completely covered in a black burka, together with gloves (Tinnemans and Banning 2008), sitting at an almost empty desk in front of a half open door to another room, allowing the spectator to see a portrait of then President Saleh on the far wall, slightly taken from a worm´s eye view. Though, many public servants wear uniforms to signal impersonality, fairness and legitimacy (for example, judges in wigs and gowns, or traffic wardens in dark neutral clothes and visible badges and insignia), this particular attire reveals nothing of the person behind, beyond glimpses of her eyes. In a sense, she appears to be the image of the ‘perfect’ bureaucrat in a classic sense, the perfect impersonal tool of the State, without evident attachment or enthusiasm and, hence, possesses the ability to assess requests strictly based on clear criteria(du Gay 2000, 2001, 2005, 2008). The only signs of her function is a large calculator and an open ledger with two unattached spreadsheets on top. There are no religious or other symbols hinting to her line of work. However, the album notes indicate that she works in the regional office of Tithing and Alms. What is in the room behind her is hard to tell. It could be the office of her superior. It could also be a room in which extra chairs and tables are stored. Yet, as she sits right next to the half open door, she records who comes to the office and the payments they make. She also appears to be a kind of gatekeeper, exercising discretion (Lipsky 1980; Herzfeld 1993) and controlling who has, and who does not have, access to the room beyond and to her superior. In that sense, she appears to embody authority as the citizen is dependent on her readiness to fulfil her role a civil “servant”. However, the contrast between her dress and the portrait of the President is striking. The President wears a brown, western suit. He has a mustache and a firm, determined look in his eye. Although the portrait is a perhaps a bit dated, he could be the President of any country. In contrast, she is dressed in a burka, a very different and particular way of concealing the individuality of a woman in public. In that sense, they are both iconic, each in their own way, and in the image, his authority legitimizes her position as a vessel of the state, yet his superiority and distance to her is also underlined in the self-same process.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE Legend: ©Banning, 2008

In the office of a male Russian village manager (photo 24/2004, Banning 2008), a portrait of President Vladimir Putin and the Russian flag on the desk also imbues the office with the authority of the state. In contrast to the Yemeni woman, this bureaucrat sits in an informal light blue striped and short-sleeved shirt, holding his reading glasses in his hands while his arms rest on the desk. We have interrupted him in his work. He too has a large calculator on his desk, as well as stacks of papers and reports, and to the right (his left) is a form of safe with a large handle and a key built into a shelving system covered with marble wallpaper. This indicates that important information can be kept safe. Although, the President wears a dark blue suit, a white shirt and a blue tie, the portrait of Putin looks slightly more informal as one sees his full upper body as he sits on a red chair with one hand on the backrest holding perhaps a pen or a pencil in his hand. His other hand supports his chin and he looks the spectator straight in the eye, almost smiling. In what must be a very small office, the bureaucrat sits extremely close to the wall, just below the picture of the President. They are around the same age (two years difference) and they have relaxed some of their formality for the spectator (the bureaucrat has taken his glasses off and Putin is in a somewhat relaxed position), which indicates another form of unity or sameness with the system, the Russian bureaucrat represents in contrast to the image of the Yemeni female bureaucrat. The distance between bureaucrat and ruler appears to be shorter. Symbols of the State are ambiguous, presenting contradictory meanings (cf. Herzfeld 1993), as they simultaneously can give legitimacy to the bureaucrat and at the same time mark a hierarchical relationship between the state and the bureaucrat.

**Records**

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE Legend: ©Banning, 2008

If paperwork characterises bureaucracy, it is paper in the form of the file that creates order out of simple paper. Bruno Latour (2010) has written about the creation of a file, its journey from an initial appeal to a full case. Archivists, historians and others have written in some detail about what we can learn from the physical form of the file, and the role even of the humble treasury tag. Files can be considered the most important ‘artifacts of modern knowledge practices’ (Riles 2006), imbued with meanings and symbolism much like a spear or a totem pole. In this album, the file has a place on most desks but, in two pictures, the file is dominant. The first, of an Indian local government worker (photo 17/2003, Banning 2008), is almost comical. A woman sits in the centre of a room at a small wooden desk with a blue baize covering that is now worn and torn. We learn that she is was hired ‘on compassionate grounds’ due to the death of her husband, who worked in the same department. She is responsible for recording and distributing all incoming mail (Tinnemans and Banning 2008, frontispiece). Wooden cupboards, more like wardrobes, line the room. She has taken her glasses off having been interrupted in her study of the content of the two files she has on her desk. We assume the cupboards are also full of files because, on top of them, there are piles of files on the verge of cascading to the floor. She doesn’t know what is in the files and, we learn, ‘she has never looked into it’ (*ibid.*). We marvel at the filing system, for there must be one. But in what order are they piled and, perhaps more important, how can the names or reference numbers on the files be read when laid flat in the way they are. In contrast, a Yemeni archivist (photo 14/2006, Banning 2008), perhaps an uber-bureaucrat, sits in the centre of a room lined with filing cabinets and shelving that rises, we assume, to the ceiling. His posture is erect, even proud, as he turns to look at the camera with one hand holding a pen poised to write, the other turning the pages of a neatly constructed file. There is order here. Even the files piled on the shelves appear to be in an orderly system. The papers open on his desk include a lever arch file for ease of retrieval.

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE Legend: ©Banning, 2008

These two images are perhaps the most easily connected both to the Weberian ideal type and to our stereotypical characterisation of bureaucrats. They record everything to be circulated, filed away and retrieved. The Indian official is dealing with contemporary records, while the Yemeni archivist stores papers for retrieval days, weeks, perhaps even years later. People who know nothing of the cases must be able to pick up the file and learn all they need to know. Bureaucracy values order, categories, regularities and systems. Scott (1998) has detailed the ways in which states ‘see’ the world, regularising streets into grids, trees into neat rows and people into numbered records. And this is where the puzzle of the Indian official is at its deepest. If there is a system to the paperwork on her desk, it must be a very particular one and its purpose is no longer clear. The two images, while of bureaucrats and of files, are in stark contrast. One is ordered and impersonal, the other is chaotic and idiosyncratic. Is there anything more dangerous than an apparently bureaucratic system that is in fact the antithesis of order, we wonder? And the answer must be yes, for we might also ask whether there is anything more dangerous than a *too* efficient administrative system, horribly illustrated by genocides such as the Holocaust, something only possible with such a modern bureaucracy. For Bauman (1989), the moral engagement of the individual civil servant risks being blurred when s/he acts within the rational, bureaucratic order that creates a distance between the civil servant and the consequences of her/his actions. Information is not neutral in the hands of an administrator. Files refer to citizens, to cases and to choices about resource allocation. In a static pose, there is no sense of the decisions, of the files as having meaning or a relationship to citizens. And nor do the public make much of an appearance.

**Adjudication**

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE Legend: ©Banning, 2008

Of all the images in the volume, and despite the informality evident in some, only two of our public servants appear open to approach by citizens, taking their work out into the community. The first (photo 10/2007, Banning 2008) is of a Chinese village chief in a rural community seated opposite the secretary of the local Communist Party branch, The desk is empty and they have both turned to look at the camera. What they are discussing, we do not know. There is no paperwork. The wall hanging is decorative, illustrating ‘a bright future’ (Tinnemans and Banning 2008, p.130) and might appear in a home. The two plaques on the table indicate the village has been recognised as excellent, as has the local party committee, but it does not appear to be an office in any normal sense. Are they touring the village, passing through perhaps on a tour of ‘their’ district? The desk is bare. They appear to carry no records or to be prepared to take any either[[1]](#footnote-1). The second (photo 29/2003, Banning 2008) is of an Indian village chief who, like his Chinese counterpart, has a key role in dissemniating information about tending crops, irrigation and fertilisers. He sits on a cloth covered bench at a cloth covered table. But his ceiling is formed by the leaves of sheltering trees, the glare of the sun being his lighting[[2]](#footnote-2). He reminds us of images of colonial District Officers receiving the requests and adjudicating the disputes of the natives. Or perhaps an anthropologist amidst ‘his’ people, as in the classic images of Malinowski seated outside his tent amidst the Trobriand Islanders, startk in his white attire and hat alongside the dark skinned islanders (1972). Paperwork is ready, brought with the official on his tour. Off camera, are the citizens queuing, awaiting the end of this photo-opportunity?

INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE Legend: ©Banning, 2008

In each case, the image is paternalistic, even colonial. The poor and benighted of the hinterlands, the interior, hosting officials on tour to whom they might present themselves for judgement. There is little paperwork, only a small pile in the Indian case. How does he know which case files he needed to bring with him, and from what hellish filing system were they retrieved before his departure? On what basis are adjudications made? So while they appear open to citizens, they are also images of power and authority, perhaps even arbitrary in nature. Are these the officials from whom Scott’s Southeast Asian peasants flee, abandoning settled agriculture for nomadic herding in the hills and resisting numerous attempts to enrol them in a nation state (Scott 2009)? To escape authority, they must escape the written records that register names, land ownership, acreage and the concomitant taxation or conscription of young men. These officials appear unthreatening to us, but their presence out ‘in the field’ might make them a potent symbol of encroaching and overwheening authority to those citizens waiting off camera to come forward and be received. After all, this is ‘their’ district, they are ‘their’ people.

**Authority**

INSERT FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE Legend: ©Banning, 2008

Police officers from each country appear in the album (with the exception of the Yemen). Much like other groupings, such as local government officers or tax officials, they apparently share little in common. Policing scholars write at length about police culture, something that crosses boundaries such that officers everywhere share key behaviours, outlooks and concerns (e.g. Reiner 2010; Loftus 2009; Fassin 2013). We are not questioning that here. But we do note the very different spaces in which these officers work. We will focus on two. The first is a police officer from Texas (photo 01/2007, Banning 2008). He sits in an imitation-wood panelled office, mimicking a log cabin from the days of the frontier? A cowboy boot (not a pair, just one) stands in the window. Mounted on the wall is the head of a steer, trophy-like but clearly more symbolic. But the eye is drawn to two framed images, not of certificates or of family. One is a sketch of a Native American, a warrior we assume having seen them in films. On the other side of the window is John Wayne as Rooster Cogburn in *True Grit*. The first is not a caricature but respectful. The warrior is proud and yet he has posed to be sketched. He is tame. John Wayne appears in one of his iconic roles, eye-patch over his left eye, dusty and rugged, untamed. The images hark back to a distant time, when perhaps the role of police officer was not what we understand today. Now, the modern one sits behind a desk, smartly dressed in uniform, clean shaven, bespectacled and thickening around the middle. In contrast, a French drugs squad officer (photo 16/2006, Banning 2008) surrounds himself with very different trophies and images of his trade. They are contemporary, including a poster of Bob Marley, hubble-bubble pipes and other materials. The accompanying book describes the desk as ‘designed like a drugs museum’. The drugs should have been destroyed within four days, but ‘we keep small souvenirs’ he confesses (Tinnemanns and Banning 2008, p.92). The officer is dressed casually, in T-shirt and with designer sunglasses on the desk. The notes describe drugs as his passion: ‘his preference is cocaine’ (*ibid.*). Is he sure which side he is on? Is he undercover?[[3]](#footnote-3) Presumably, not anymore.

INSERT FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE Legend: ©Banning, 2008

For all the formal authority and the historic echoes of rugged Texas Rangers of old, the modern variety is seated behind a desk. He doesn’t appear ready to ride off after a suspect or gather a posse. After all, he only has one boot. With all his informality, the French drugs officer might pass you on the street and attract no attention. Does he understand his trade? Is he any different to a Texan riding into the *banlieu* to arrest North African males for possession? Despite time, situation, culture and the nature of the crimes, are they so different, in their own sense of selves at least?

**Legitimacy**

INSERT FIGURE 9 ABOUT HERE Legend: ©Banning, 2008

Behind all of these images lies a question of legitimacy. Whether represented by images of a head of state, by files, by an openness to citizens or by legal powers, legitimacy is both apparent and open to question. One of the images that stands out, in terms of organizing an office and representing oneself as a legitimate embodiment of state authority, is a Bolivian civil servant, who houses his public office in the back of his shop (photo 25/2005, Banning 2008). In his case, being a civil servant is only a part of his professional life and, we assume, it does not take up most of his time. Yet, he sits half-smiling in his blue and white checkered shirt looking proudly at the camera. The legitimacy of this bureaucrat is less provided by tokens of the State than by the personalized décor of the office. There are two certificates hanging in the middle of the image, yet one would have to stand very close to be able to read the content. Further, one of the certificates is partly covered by a poster for the national government programme (PRONAGOB) encouraging people to participate in the democratic process. At election time, the back of the shop doubles as a polling station (Tinnemanns and Banning 2008, p.50). On the side wall of the office hangs a poster portraying all Bolivian presidents since independence. However, more prominent on the wall is a picture of a young couple. It is his wedding day in 1967, and the accompanying volume tells us he has six children (*ibid.*). A rosary hangs from the wedding photo. And while there is a sign, a figure, titled ‘Sucre’ (the constitutional capital of Bolivia), family appears to legitimize this man, more so than these other images of authority. Two desks are in front of the bureaucrat, covered by tablecloths and piles of paper, reports, pens, corrective fluids, rubber gum, and a bowl displaying wooden fruits. In the bookcase, further piles of paper, reports and other office accoutrements are juxtaposed with a blender, a jug and an almost empty bottle of jam. The office is far less organized and formal than many of the other offices displayed in the book, and much more homely, personalized and inhabited by a bureaucrat who appears to be passionate about his job. In that sense, his legitimacy seems less informed by classic bureaucratic virtues and symbols, and perhaps more informed by his apparent likeability and because he might be a respected shop owner in his local community.

INSERT FIGURE 10 ABOUT HERE Legend: ©Banning, 2008

In contrast, we have an image of a Liberian police Major working in the Reconstructing Room of the Traffic Police (photo 04/2006, Banning 2008). Apart from some plastic bowls, a bottle and a baby’s pink sandal, together with other miscellaneous objects, stacked on top of a filing cabinet, the office signals very clearly the line of work conducted here. On the side wall, there is a chart of traffic signs and a black flag is placed in the corner. The Major sits smiling behind his desk dressed smartly in his uniform, with small stacks of paper, notebooks, a clipboard, and his sunglasses in front of him. He is holding a pen in each of his hands. He appears to be so busy, writing up important information, that he does not have time to put down either pen for a photo. Underneath the desk, one sees his perfectly polished and shiny black shoes. Behind him is a blackboard giving a date to the top right. Underneath it is a picture, drawn with chalk, representing a road accident, displaying a highway and two cars driving towards each other, arrows showing the direction of travel and the inevitable collision. On the other half side of the blackboard, the ‘verse for today’ (John 1-1.3) is carefully written in perfect script:

*In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.*

Over the blackboard hangs a picture of a senior police officer, also smiling[[4]](#footnote-4). Beneath the blackboard, a blue bike rests against the wall, ready for use. The office (and the bureaucrat´s appearance) signal law and order, of a kindly variety, though firmly under the supervision of a superior officer and of the Lord himself. As such, we sense the monopoly of violence of the state (Weber 1978), legitimizing its use in specific circumstances by the police or the military - Lenin’s (1933) ‘special bodies of armed men’ - here the Liberian Major. However, in the description that accompanies the album, we are provided with some additional information about the workings of this particular office. Notably, we are informed that, sometimes, if victims of traffic accidents are willing to pay ‘a little extra’, the department will rapidly write ‘a favorable report to present to a judge’ (Banning 2008). As this information must have been provided openly to the photographer and writer, such actions do not seem to interfere with or corrupt the bureau or the bureaucrat. Rather, it is a taken for granted way of carrying out the duties of the office.

The means by which legitimacy is represented in these two offices and the appearances of the bureaucrats are completely different. One conveys legitimacy through intimacy and personality. His family is more prominent than formal sources of legitimacy, yet there is no indication of incorrectness or a lack of a sense of responsibility. The other gives an impression of correctness and high moral character, yet his way of carrying out his duties would, in another context, be termed ‘corrupt’. This is the one thing that most undermines legitimacy in any classic understanding of bureaucracy (Weber 1978; du Gay 2000). Indeed, bureaucracy was, among other things, a response to the arbitrary exercise of authority. And yet here it is declared openly. Is it any more corrupt than payments for additional services (first class train travel or express passport applications) that we might pay for? And what are the boundaries between a part-time bureaucrat conducting official business who might also then look to sell some groceries or other items? Is this so different to services contracted out to private providers with which we have become so familiar?

**By way of conclusion**

A lot has been and will continue to be said about the representation debate, but we do not want to go into depth about this (cf. Clifford and Marcus 1986). However, analyzing the *Bureaucratics* images poses several questions that connect to these discussions. Do the similarities between the bureaucrats that we (two white, Western, middle class scholars of bureaucracy, though of different nationalities, age and gender) have identified arise from the fact that we are informed by some of the same references, experiences and ideals as the photographer of the images? What would the images look like if the Yemeni woman had taken them? Or what if she visited The Netherlands, Banning’s home, or the UK and Denmark, where the authors of this chapter are from? How would she organize the photos and how would, for example, a Danish tax collector react to the images depicting her? Further, the images are taken, (however, staged) to mimic the gaze of a citizen entering the office in search of assistance. But, what if these citizens where to present their representations of what they are faced by? Would we see more pictures of bureaucrats on the fly, on the move and distracted, perhaps struggling to interpret rules and regulations, to find relevant files and, at the same time, to understand the expectations of the citizens they engage with on a daily basis? In the images in this album, the bureaucrats in their offices almost look like still life. We have long recognized the more dynamic aspects of the daily activities and decision-making of street-level bureaucrats, working with dilemmas, uncertainty, finite resources and unfunded mandates (Lipsky 1980; Smith and Lewis 2011; Jazabkowski and Lê 2016; Bjerge and Rowe 2017), but do citizens still mainly see the stereotypical version of bureaucrats holding an office? We can only speculate about these questions.[[5]](#footnote-5)

We must also acknowledge that our selection of the ten portraits are, in many ways, personal. We are drawn to these images, to what we see in them. We would defend them as representative, and we would stand by our own interpretations. But we also acknowledge that others might focus on very different images and draw some other points. For instance, we might have contrasted ‘developed’ and ‘less developed’ countries. Or, in the case of China, we might have focused on the idea of a state in transition, some images being very modern in contrast to others. We would both encourage such further analysis and discussion. Indeed, we might wonder whether there is scope for a wider project examining representations of bureaucrats, asking questions about who is photographed, by whom and for what audience.

Returning to the idea, presented by Herzfeld (1993), that certain characteristics of bureaucrats exaggerate the ‘worst traits’ of national character, we might moderate this statement after conducting an analysis of the images in the album. On the one hand, the images and accompanying information *do* demonstrate the many different shapes and colours in which bureaucracy manifests in everyday practice. They illuminate specific types of power relations between citizens and bureaucrats, as well as between bureaucrats and the state system s/he represents, different ways of organizing one´s office and files, different fields of expertise and different ways of interpreting rules and regulations. Some of these echo vernacular perceptions of national character. For example, we are not surprised by the unequal position of the female Yemini bureaucrat in both dress and physical position, or the somewhat corrupt Major in Liberia and, more sympathetically, the welcoming, homely atmosphere of the Bolivian shopkeeper/bureaucrat´s office or the jovial, cowboy-like officer from the US.

On the other hand, as we have argued, the images illustrate a number of generic traits. They share a repertoire of symbols and artefacts representing both authority and legitimacy and closely associated with representations of bureaucracy: files; desks behind which they sit; certificates; and pictures underlining the relationship to the State. This leaves us with what may best be described as a sense of a uniformity of differences, a dialectic or even tension between the two? Despite decades of reform and restructuring in an effort to improve the ways in which state authority is exercised (what we often talk of as ‘good governance’?), the day-to-day performance of bureaucratic office, like any other form of human activity, is always complex, less straightforward and more ambiguous. Perhaps this is what the images of bureaucrats and their offices, as presented by Jan Banning, are telling us?

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1. We have since learnt: ‘What struck us was that the mayor (the elderly man) was elected but clearly had no authority; it was the appointed party chief who answered all questions, also those to the mayor. This was, if I’m not mistaken, the mayor’s office: not surprisingly, there was nothing there, as his seemed to be a fake job’ (personal correspondence with Jan Banning, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. We have since learnt: ‘It was a garage box of sorts, with no window. So if the weather was nice (and not too hot), he’d take his desk and files outside and work (or whatever he did) there’ (personal correspondence with Jan Banning, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. We have since learnt that he had indeed been undercover. At the time the photo was taken, he was due to retire in the near future and so didn’t mind being revealed (personal correspondence with Jan Banning, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We have since learnt that the image is actually of the Major himself (personal correspondence with Jan Banning, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. ‘I too was curious what e.g. an Indian audience would think of the photos. So when the Indian chapter received a World Press Photo award in 2004, I immediately checked if the Indian media paid any attention to that. They did. Then I asked my contacts there (translator and others) what the reactions in their network were. Most people were flabbergasted that such boring photos received an award.’ (Jan Banning, personal correspondence, 2019) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)