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Bureaucracy refers to the systems of people, documents, and regulations that organize the day-to-day operations of the state. Bureaucracy is the basis for the functioning of the state in all its spheres, including public policy management, the legal system, the social security system, among others. Bureaucracy materializes logics, rationalities, decision-making processes, and modes of operation of the state. But what happens to bureaucracy as the state becomes datafied? We argue that the history of bureaucracy and its association with a fetishism of neutrality makes it uniquely vulnerable to arguments that it should be mechanized, automated, and datafied. After all, much of contemporary data technology is marketed on its supposed inherent values of efficiency and neutrality. We use the case of Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's 2019 efforts to digitize aspects of the government to demonstrate how the datafication of bureaucracy is inherently political, despite presenting itself as a technical process. We also discuss how datafication processes driven by companies today are redefining the role of state bureaucracy in regulating services and building trust in the private sector.

The management and functioning of the state are carried out through bureaucracy. It is through the bureaucratic apparatus that the state exercises, for example, the monopoly to confer legal existence to individuals. It is also within the state bureaucratic apparatus that the design, implementation, and execution of public policies and the granting of social benefits take place.

German sociologist Max Weber wrote about the role of rationalization in modern capitalist society to theorize bureaucracy. Rationalization can be recognized in bureaucratic state administration, in labor management and organization, in the field of science, and in the conduct of life. Modern bureaucracy is based on impersonality, efficiency, and calculation. Its governing body is made up of employees guided not by values or interests, but by impersonal and legally-established laws, rules, and procedures, which are focused on the technical and efficient operation of public administration.<sup>1</sup> In the early 20th century, Weber had already pointed to the irrationality that permeates this rationalization, in a bureaucratic apparatus that operates in a dehumanized, automated way, focused on practical purposes.<sup>2</sup>

Underlying bureaucratic rationalization is what we're calling a fetishization of neutrality. That is, state bureaucracy is seen as valid, fair even, when it operates according to consistent, inflexible, and legally-determined procedures.<sup>3</sup> Thus, rationalization as a means of achieving neutrality is seen as politically valuable, even as it de-humanizes the process. This is the irrational rationalization that Weber describes, and is the contradiction that collides with contemporary attempts at datafication.

Datafication has long been imagined as a vehicle for promoting efficiency and objectivity, operating through purely technical means that surpass human capabilities.<sup>4</sup> However, the processes of digitization in bureaucracy involves a perverse encounter that enhances the fetish of neutrality, both of technology and bureaucracy. The datafication of bureaucracy incorporates, in an obscure and challenging-to-map manner, inequalities and social dynamics into selection, methods, and parameters for verifying citizens' eligibility, among other elements. Consequently, the datafication of bureaucracy can produce or reproduce, in an unpredictable or unplanned way, social inequalities and injustices.<sup>5</sup>

1 Max Weber, *Economy and Society*. Vol.01, (Univ. of California Press, 1978).

2 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism*. The revised 1920 edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

3 Amina Abdu, Abigail Jacobs, "Public Administration," in *Keywords of the Datafied State*, eds. Jenna Burrell, Ranjit Singh, and Patrick Davison (Data & Society, 2024).

4 Tarleton Gillespie, "The Relevance of Algorithms," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society*, eds. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo Boczkowski, and Kirsten Foot (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014) 167–193.

5 Virginia Eubanks, *Automating Inequality: How High-tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2018); Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2016); Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018).

In Brazil, the government of Jair Bolsonaro adopted a series of initiatives aimed at accelerating digitization in public services. Measures were implemented to promote the integration of various databases, as well as mechanisms for centralizing population data management. The government's description and justification for these efforts clearly demonstrates the fetish of neutrality that runs between bureaucracy and data technologies. Such measures were defended as inherently apolitical, but masked the ways in which the supposed reduction of bureaucracy actually extended its power.

In 2019, the government created the Special Secretariat for Debureaucratization, Public Administration and Digital Government (Secretaria da Desburocratização, Gestão e Governo Digital), and in 2020, a strategic plan for digital government. In the name of streamlining bureaucracy, the strategy relied on two fronts: expanding the digitization of public services and integrating databases from different government entities. In 2019, the Citizen Base Registry (CBC) was created by a federal decree. This major database aims to integrate multiple datasets from different government entities and facilitate their access to this centrally maintained one, which includes citizens' biographical, biometric, and registration data. The decree sets objectives such as:

simplifying the provision of public services, guiding and optimizing the formulation, implementation, evaluation, and monitoring of public policies, enabling the analysis of access conditions and maintenance of social and fiscal benefits, promoting the improvement of the quality and reliability of data held by the federal public administration, and increasing the quality and efficiency of internal operations of the federal public administration.<sup>6</sup>

Based on the defense of streamlining bureaucracy, the government facilitates both integration and flow between various databases. The decree

6 Presidência Geral da República, "Decreto 10.046/2019," Brasília, 2019.

also established a Central Data Governance Committee (Comitê Central de Governança de Dados), which is responsible for defining the guidelines that determine the levels of data restriction on the datasets (broad, restricted, or specific). Initially, this committee consisted only of representatives from government institutions. Responding to demands from the Supreme Court, two representatives from civil society entities were included in the Central Data Governance Committee, and the CBC became subject to the General Data Protection Law in force since 2020. The fact is that Brazil is building a centralized and fluid state database, implemented without involvement or debate with civil society entities. The use of such data infrastructure to bypass public oversight is far from a neutral, bureaucratic act.

Of further concern is that while pushing to dataify the state, the Bolsonaro government signaled its intentions to both facilitate private entities' access to state databases, as well as integrate data management, surveillance, and state security policies.<sup>7</sup> The result would be a new means of citizen data flowing to other actors. Among the federal entities that had already requested access to the CBC in 2019 were the Army Command and the Brazilian Intelligence Agency.<sup>8</sup>

With the election of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, the datafication of bureaucracy and public services continue. It will be necessary to investigate over time the regulatory mechanisms and paths taken by this administration in the extraction and uses of citizens' data.

The fetish of neutrality also obfuscates the role of corporations that oligopolize the means of digitization. These corporations present themselves as intermediaries — (neutral) providers of technology in various fields. And yet, mapping, explaining, or delimiting the power of these corporations is incredibly difficult.

<sup>7</sup> Coding Rights, *Cadastro Base do Cidadão: A Megalôxia de Dados* (Rio de Janeiro: Coding Rights, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> Coding Rights, *Cadastro*.

While data is being used to streamline and control certain aspects of governance, such as national security and taxation, it has also been used to relinquish government oversight in other aspects, such as the management of labor.<sup>9</sup> We refer to this as the uberization of work that manifests along three interrelated social transformations: the informalization of bureaucratic practices that govern labor processes; the transformation of workers into just-in-time workers; and the centralization of labor control through oligopolies.<sup>10</sup> Again, data is central to these processes, as private companies such as Uber take over the organization of certain aspects of public life (public transportation, for example) by espousing neutrality in organizing the relationship between riders and drivers on public roads.

With the uberization of work, there is also a noticeable shift away from the centrality of the state in conferring trust and legality to services offered by the private sector. Historically, state bureaucracy has been the locus for processing and enforcing certifications and regulations that grant legality to the private sector. Companies like Uber construct trust and certification for their services through new means, challenging the power of the state. In this way the datafication processes of work management serve as mechanisms to confer legitimacy, no longer relying on legally-established regulations but on the trust built through the actions of a multitude of vigilant consumers who monitor and certify the quality of work.<sup>11</sup>

The datafication of the bureaucratic apparatus is based on the defense of efficiency, technique, and impersonality within the state; however, it produces modes of control and surveillance over citizens as well as transfers state control to private entities. Both these developments challenge emerging regulations around data protection in countries such as Brazil, which must navigate competing private interests and sociopolitical uses of data.

9 Burcu Baykurt, "Corporate Capture," in *Keywords of the Datafied State*, eds. Jenna Burrell, Ranjit Singh, and Patrick Davison (Data & Society, 2024).

10 Ludmila Abilio, "Uberization: The Periphery as the Future of Work?" in *Platformization and Informality*, eds. Aditi Surie and Ursula Huws, (Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan, 2023).

11 Abilio, "Uberization."