

BY JOHN SUMMERS

It's June 2019, and my son, Misha, has begun returning home from his summer school autism classroom in Cambridge in a bad mood. On some days, he is fidgety and riled up, and on others, he wears a hangdog look. One afternoon, a teacher's aide addresses my expression of concern by informing me he's been refusing to eat his lunch. Aha, he's hungry. But why? Misha isn't apt to say. At 7 years old, he doesn't speak, or write, or read — at least not very much.

Maybe he doesn't find the victuals delectable? It's true, the aide agrees, a piece of stale pita bread with three cubes of cheddar cheese tucked inside doesn't whet Misha's appetite. But the vegetarian option is all that remains after he declines his cheeseburger wraps.

Now, that *is* odd. Misha carries seven medical diagnoses, but nothing between heaven and earth typically prevents him from scarfing cheeseburgers. The aide ushers me into the hallway and lowers her voice. Probably, she whispers, he doesn't appreciate cheeseburgers served cold.

Cold?

The regular school cafeteria is closed for the summer. Every morning, the lunches arrive prepackaged in milk chests with instructions for reheating the cheeseburgers. The classroom contains a microwave. But the teachers have been forbidden to touch the appliance. Abashed, she divulges that none of Misha's classmates have been eating lunch.

Her look of embarrassment reflects a secret truth. The predicament of autistic people like my son stems not principally from their challenges, real as those are, but from the failure of medical, educational, and human services institutions to provide for their actual needs. What explains the discrepancy?

The rule enjoining the microwave, the aide went on to say, had issued out of the office of the Cambridge Summer Food Program. I walk over to that program's office several blocks away and buttonhole the director at her desk. You see, my son attends summer school. He's

The department denies jurisdiction and refers me to the US Department of Agriculture, the funder of the Cambridge Summer Food Program. The US Department of Agriculture disclaims jurisdiction as well. Was I not aware of the difference between a federal funder and a local administrator of said funding? I was not. Several more days of calling around puts me on the phone with the state's "point person" for the federal grant. She is the chief nutritionist of the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. By now, having regaled eight or nine different officials from the top, I've honed my query. The chief nutritionist listens attentively through its inherent tedium. Our 25-minute colloquy concludes that no custom, practice, stipulation, statute, rule, or regulation forbids the use of microwaves in this circumstance.

Triumphant, I relay the news to the district's administrator along with a request to promptly rescind the injunction. The administrator acknowledges the correction but puts my request on ice, as it were. She needs to sound out "upper administration." A week later, I receive her email. "I have been informed that teachers will be able to heat up student lunches on the days that the delivered food should be served warm," she writes, without explaining the turnabout. "I will email teachers now so that they know." By this time, summer school has nearly ended.

Most of the time, such senselessness appears as a byproduct of modern life, a phenomenon at once banal, implacable, and ubiquitous. Repeating a simple question — *Why?* — tends to leave one feeling dumb. Only when bureaucracy emits disturbing undertones and some procedural howler turns up their volume does the mind concentrate on a strange disquiet. What, then, does the case of the cold cheeseburgers reveal about bureaucracy as a mode of power?

All bureaucracies operate according to the principle of jurisdiction. Rules, regulations, and laws underwrite the command authority of all duly placed officials. In this case, though, nobody knew who had jurisdiction,

interpretative labor? Who is principally required to take the perspective of the other party? Why children like Misha must bear this burden, impelled to expend enormous amounts of energy attempting to understand the motivations and perceptions of dictating educators, is a question that hardly ever comes up for debate.

The reason, Graeber says, is due to bureaucracy, a social technology devised to bless the "lopsided structures of imagination" that keep institutions running efficiently. The production of norms absolves the official of any obligation to imagine the point of view of the subordinated party, which scrabbles for an interpretive foothold in an environment of organized stupidity. Radical inequalities of power combine laziness with ignorance to produce the idiotic stare of officialdom.

I myself expend a fair amount of interpretive labor entreating school authorities. Why not outflank them with my own, Misha-specific policy document? *Now please turn to page 282. See there, serving temperature — cheeseburgers. Yes, that's correct, initial the box; it's just boilerplate.* Policies are just factitious declarations of authority, interpretations of regulations that are themselves just interpretations of legislation. Bureaucracy isn't natural or inexorable; it's perpetuated by our failures to confront the tyranny of administrative power with human forms of knowledge and being.

Why do we usually surrender and lower our sights in the name of being realistic? The answer, Graeber contends, stems from our intuition that lopsided structures of imagination are ultimately enforced by the threat of violence. In the velvet glove, an iron fist awaits.

Graeber's contention perhaps seems inapplicable to this case. A half century ago, findings from the social study of autism helped to close the state schools and asylums. A humanitarian movement assailed the pervasive violence in residential facilities, accusing them of functioning as "warehouses" and "total institutions." Haven't we moved beyond the violence of the bad old days? Anyway, Cambridge boasts a municipal mission explicitly committed to "diversity," "social justice," "intellectual freedom," and other high-minded values.

Yet Cambridge is a perfect emblem of a bureaucratic

What my autistic son's cold cheeseburgers taught me about bureaucracy

autistic. He doesn't talk. He won't eat the cheeseburgers you're sending over cold. No, he isn't in one of the summer camps; he's in the autism classroom at the summer school. No, he hasn't complained exactly; he doesn't talk. Yes, the microwave functions fine; someone in this office apparently forbade the teachers from operating it.

Oh, yes, comes the blithe reply, the regular school cafeteria is closed for the summer. *I know that.* Well, the microwaves that remain in the classrooms belong to the Food and Nutrition Office, and the director issued a peremptory edict before she adjourned for vacation forbidding anyone to operate her department's microwaves. Very sorry, there's nothing that this program can do. You might contact the district's administrator in charge of autism, if it means that much to you.

The district's administrator in charge of autism confirms the microwave belongs to the Food and Nutrition Office. If that microwave can't be used, I remonstrate, then permit me to donate one, so that Misha and his classmates can end their hunger strike. No, she replies. Massachusetts state regulations stipulate only certified food handlers may touch the appliances. None of the summer teachers are so certified; ergo, no microwaves may be used. This is for everyone's safety.

Who issues these certifications of which you speak? A vendor, ServSafe, she answers. I telephone ServSafe. Yes, confirms the pleasant person who answers the phone, our company does offer training and certification in food handling. But she struggles to follow the preamble to my request for help in getting to the root of the matter. Let me transfer you to a supervisor, Mr. Summers.

To the ServSafe supervisor I knock up a rough narrative of the situation, likening it — for reasons I can put down only to a mix of defensiveness and exasperation — to certain stories and novels by Franz Kafka. A long silence follows my exegesis of "The Metamorphosis." "Your question is bizarre," the irritated supervisor finally breaks in; ServSafe has nothing to do with microwaves. If it means that much to you, try the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

I try the Massachusetts Department of Public Health.

and the requisite policy didn't exist. Yet there could be no special favors. The attitude of detachment — a principled indifference to the inner life of will, instinct, and emotion — constitutes bureaucracy's special quality among social structures. It de-personalizes, as this case shows, the best-intentioned caregivers. Pretty much any *unofficial* person anywhere in the world would instantly know what to do upon encountering a group of hungry disabled 7-year-olds. Feed them! Misha's teachers possessed the resources to do what their conscience would oblige in every other social situation. Yet the chain of authority confounded their most basic predilection.

My indignation could make no difference. Indignation draws counterparties into shared morality. Bureaucracies operate on the basis of written rules, not moral improvisation. The administrator reached for the retort of a state regulation she supposed must demarcate microwave authority to the domain of certificate holders. This supposition, ludicrous on its face, turned out to be untrue as well. But her genuflection shows that bureaucracy must be imagined before manifesting in material fact.

Families like mine are requested to undertake this exercise all the time. Nonspeaking autistics like Misha must have familiar structures, standard routines, and stable reinforcers to "prevent regression," we are told. But maybe this insistence reflects the abstract needs of officials, rather than the actual needs of the children. When I informed the administrator in charge that no written policy prevented the teachers from feeding the children edible food, she herself appeared to regress into a state of occupational sociopathy. She needed to defer to the celestial hierarchy of "upper administration" to tell her what to do.

Her complicity in a minor act of cruelty probably never occurred to her. Social relations founded on domination, the anthropologist David Graeber suggests, remain hidden until someone breaks in and asks the pertinent question: Which party bears the burden of the

society founded on the threat of violence. After all, even though violent crime rates in Cambridge are far below the average in like-sized cities around the country and have been trending downward for decades, the ranks of sworn officers in the Cambridge Police Department keep growing. How do they occupy their time? And why do they maintain a military-grade armory of tear gas, sniper rifles, and submachine guns? In 2021, one murder and 313 other violent crimes took place here. That same year, the police department took 112,000 calls for service, a number nearly equivalent to every man, woman, and child in the city. The denizens of the liberal city are constantly calling people with guns over bicycle theft, Internet scams, traffic accidents, and "loud arguments."

Most police work, as Graeber observes, has very little to do with solving crime. Across the country, the overwhelming proportion of calls to which police respond are conflicts over the myriad rules that abridge personal freedom with the element of caprice. "Bureaucrats with guns," he calls police.

Recall the administrator's justification for disallowing noncertified operation of the microwave: "This is for everyone's safety." This was obviously absurd. But what would have happened had I pushed past the absurdity with direct action rather than unctuous pleading?

Picture a man cradling a large electronic device outside the locked door of an elementary school around lunchtime. He has no appointment, no lanyard. He refuses to desist. He says he needs to . . . warm up cheeseburgers? No rule forbids it, he cries! Eventually, men with guns, sticks, and tasers would arrive. And when they did so, would they accept his representations of the situation as compelling, or plausible, or even coherent? Would Cambridge police command the school authorities to stand aside and open the door to the charity of a meal for a group of hungry disabled 7-year-olds? The question answers itself.

John Summers is a research fellow in history and disability at New America and the editorial director of Lingua Franca Media.

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