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Best Practices for Besting the Bureaucracy: Avoiding Military Service in Israel

This article considers the evasion of mandatory military service in Israel. Exemption from service is granted on a number of grounds at the discretion of military bureaucrats. Each year, many young people seek to obtain such an exemption for a wide variety of reasons, both ideological and pragmatic. At their disposal is a body of knowledge, collectively assembled by young recruits who have previously encountered the bureaucracy; that is, a best practices guide to navigate the exemption process. This article examines the creation and deployment of this body of knowledge. These best practices include information about legitimate exemptions and evaluation criteria, bureaucratic procedures, a typology of bureaucrats who a young recruit will encounter, advice about the type of persona to present to the military bureaucrats, as well as the key elements of the performance of this persona. Many ethnographic accounts describe the ways the bureaucratic gaze controls, disciplines, and frustrates clients attempting to accomplish their goals. This article considers the ways clients return the gaze of the state through their own surveillance and knowledge production, and in doing so flip the script on bureaucratic control. [bureaucracy, military, Israel, draft evasion, surveillance]

Shira¹ and I had taken the bus from Tel Aviv to the local military induction center, one of five in Israel. A week earlier, Shira had said that she wanted to go alone, but the night before, she called and asked if I would come with her. I had passed this building many times before without thinking much about it. It looked like many other government buildings in Israel: reinforced concrete and a certain derelict feel, with uneven paint and protrusive pipes emerging from the façade. However, this bureaucratic building buzzed with life. In its hallways, every year, thousands of young people are inducted into the cardinal undertaking of civic life among Israeli Jews: military service.

Both Shira and I were taken aback by the scene we found there. Shira had spent the last several months preparing herself for this day, but it was the minor, unexpected details that were tripping her up, telling me: “I don’t even know where I’m supposed to go.” The outside plaza was filled with young recruits milling about, along with their families and friends, calling boisterously to each other about where to go and posing for family pictures. We observed a young recruit striking a “tough guy” pose with an imaginary gun. Shira looked horrified at this unconstrained jouissance, having for some time surrounded herself with like-minded antimilitarist feminists from her urban social circle. “Want a picture?” I joked. Shira mustered a smile, though it was clear her nerves were setting in. Shira and I did not know quite how to behave around these smiling, excited scenes of enthusiasm, because, unlike these others, Shira’s mission at the induction center was not to start a new chapter in her life as a soldier but rather to evade military service.

Shira wanted to attain an exemption, but receiving one required convincing a series of military bureaucrats that she met at least one of the established, legal criteria. In her own

mind, and likely in the opinion of the military if they had full access to the details of her life, she should not have been eligible for any exemption. Thus, she planned to feign the necessary criteria.

Shira was not walking into this effort blindly, but instead had a wealth of information about the exemption process and the possible pitfalls she might encounter along the way. She knew about each type of individual she would have to convince, from the time she entered the door to the time she left through it. She had been studying for this series of encounters, and probably knew more about the exemption process than many of the bureaucrats inside. That being said, her exemption was far from guaranteed, as it would be dependent not only on her performance, but also on the discretion of several individuals, each of whom could thwart her efforts at any stage in the process. I waited while she figured out where she needed to go, and then I got back on the bus. "Call me when you get out," I told her as I left. "Or from jail," she muttered.

Shira had decided as a child that she would not serve in the military. In her case, her decision was related to her objection to the occupation of the Palestinian Territories and the military's deleterious effects on women (Sasson-Levy 2003). Shira joined a youth group with which I did participant observation. The group was run by the NGO New Profile, which encourages young people to (re)consider their options regarding joining the military. This feminist antimilitary organization aims to make it more publicly known that there are ways to avoid military service. I also observed private sessions in which volunteers would consult with those seeking to avoid service, offering general information and personalized advice on how to attain an exemption. This advice was dispensed based on an archive of information that was collectively assembled by thousands of young people who reported on their experiences trying to gain exemption from service. Through this collective data gathering, young recruits flip the script on the military's bureaucratic knowledge.

Seeing Like a Client

This article considers the ways Shira and other young people I observed created a persona, or bureaucratic identity, tailored to the purpose of avoiding military service.² By means of performance and strategic documentation practices, a recruit suggests life experiences and subject positions that are somewhat different from his or her own. To do this, my interlocutors made use of an available body of knowledge accumulated by those pursuing similar goals of avoiding conscription. This body of knowledge, a guide of best practices for avoiding military service, was gathered slowly over time through the collective study and detailed examination of bureaucratic practices and dispositions. It was made available to recruits through online guides and personal consultants, who are experts on the bureaucratic process.

Information on the recruitment process is reported and collected in different ways. Independent volunteer consultants counsel young people through the process of avoiding military service and diligently follow their experiences, both giving and collecting information. The larger data was accumulated through an online forum run by New Profile, where thousands of young people have written about their ongoing experiences trying to avoid service. The military has released statistics showing that 48 percent of Israeli youths do not enlist in the Israeli Defense Forces (Pfeffer 2010). Some are automatically exempt, but approximately 25 percent actively evade service (Rosenfeld 2009) for all sorts of reasons that often do not strictly separate the personal from the political. This forum gives a constant stream of real-time information about people's experiences with the military bureaucracy, as well as current developments and changes. In a reversal of conventional expectations, this forum surveys and documents the bureaucracy.

This body of knowledge offers a unique opportunity to consider how the citizen-client returns the gaze of the state and its bureaucrats.³ It teaches how bureaucrats and bureaucracies are imagined, narrated, and given meaning by their clients. It represents a singularly pragmatic perspective that is less concerned with political or bureaucratic intent, and more concerned with achieving specific outcomes. Through this, perspectives on bureaucratic power and the ways this power can be manipulated, and even parodied, are gained. In this article, I examine the body of knowledge accumulated about the Israeli military recruitment process and the motivations of bureaucrats by those people seeking to avoid military service. This knowledge, deployed by young people to claim exemptions, uses the military's own regulations, biases, and practices against itself. I find that the culture of bureaucracy is subject to the surveillance of the public, and argue that the bureaucratic encounter is not a one-way mirror in which the state is able to observe the public while remaining invisible and obscure, but rather the view is distorted from both sides. In certain circumstances, the client can use this distortion to frustrate the bureaucracy as much as the other way around. Here, clients engage in bureaucratic logic and para-bureaucratic praxis by building their own alternative archive of best practices in order to achieve their goal of avoiding service. This demonstrates that bureaucracy is not the exclusive purview of the state, but can be deployed against it.

Though bureaucracies are ostensibly ruled by rule and regulation, the discretion of street-level bureaucrats often determines the fate of those who encounter them. Recent interest in bureaucracy and bureaucratic forms and practices goes beyond Max Weber's (1978, 225) foundational definition of bureaucratic administration as domination through knowledge to consider the everyday procedures and practices that are often neither rational nor neutral. Anya Bernstein and Elizabeth Mertz note that bureaucratic administration, far from being the mere implementation of established rules, involves "ongoing linguistic and social processes of negotiation" (2011, 6). Many recent accounts have considered how bureaucrats make decisions, and how they evaluate clients in order to make judgments about their worthiness. These accounts reveal an impenetrable institutional culture and show the ways that bureaucracies are often irrational, opaque, and illegible. They demonstrate how this frustrates clients who do not fit state topologies, who do not fit subjective moral categories of worth, or who do not conform to cultural scripts.

This article's main focus is clients, and it fundamentally relies on anthropological research on the culture of bureaucrats. For example, Don Handelman (1976, 2004) has not only supplied much of what is known about bureaucratic rationality, but he has also meticulously described its implementation in Israeli institutions. Importantly, he has demonstrated the ways bureaucratic encounters are designed to produce bureaucratic subjectivities in Israeli citizens (2004). This article builds from this research by showing the ways these bureaucratic competences are not only mobilized by the state for purposes of compliance, but also deployed by clients for purposes of resistance. In doing so, this article seeks to add to the knowledge of what Michael Lipsky termed "street-level bureaucracy" (1980). Lipsky's observation that bureaucratic opacity is not only a question of inconsistency of implementation, but often also is a result of conflicting and ambiguous goals, is fundamental to understanding the techniques of the reluctant recruits presented in this article. As will be made clear, it is the conflicting motivations and goals of military bureaucrats that my interlocutors seek to exploit in their quest for exemption. This article also builds on Anelise Riles's (2000) seminal work on bureaucratic culture. Following Riles's examination into the production of bureaucratic knowledge, I look at the production of knowledge about bureaucratic practice. In contrast to these and other studies on bureaucrats themselves, I examine the gaze of the public on state bureaucracy, how clients evaluate state bureaucrats,

and how they resist bureaucratic practices of control through parody. In doing so, I explore what it means to “see like a client.”⁴

Sanctioned Exemptions from Military Service

There are a finite number of ways for Jewish Israelis to be legally exempted from military service, which were differentially available to my interlocutors according to their biographical histories.⁵ One way to be exempted is to outwardly maintain a very religious lifestyle, preferably along with your entire family. In modern Israel, such a lifestyle would include living in an ultra-orthodox neighborhood, attending a religious high school, being active in a religious community, as well as outwardly maintaining the religious edicts concerning dress, food, and comportment.⁶ Most of my interlocutors were not religious,⁷ and so did not qualify for this exemption, which would be nearly impossible to fake.

A woman can also be exempt if she is married, a mother, or pregnant. This was not a very popular choice for the young women I observed, as some were skeptical about the institution of marriage generally, while others said they thought this to be too significant a change in lifestyle. Although I never met anyone who had a child in order to qualify for military exemption, I did encounter a few young women, though none among my closest interlocutors, who had arranged marriages with the intent of quick divorces in order to avoid conscription into the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

Several of my interlocutors applied for the exemption offered to pacifists. However, this is an intensely scrutinized category, and a very difficult one to receive, as one must convince a military committee that he or she is a complete pacifist, and that the refusal does not have the slightest connection to Israeli politics. Many applicants using this exemption find themselves in jail, so those seeking to avoid military service consider it to be highly self-sacrificial.

Another possibility is to be deemed unsuitable for military service, in accordance with Section 36 of the Security Service Law. Such an exemption is given to someone found to be below the threshold for recruitment. This classification is very vague, but it reflects the military’s discretionary right not to recruit someone if they feel the person is not qualified to serve, or will be troublesome to the military. There are two ways to get this type of exemption. One is to have documented “red flags” at the time of recruitment, such as an arrest or conviction, evidence of drug use or abuse, exceptionally bad school performance, truancy, delinquency, or a troubled family life. Some of my interlocutors were able to meet these criteria. A few were overachievers in school, but still managed to demonstrate drug use, and a few had been detained by the military during protests in the Occupied Territories. For this exemption, an arrest that took place during a political protest is not ideal for the purpose of conveying delinquency, unlike theft or other nonpolitical crimes, but it at least helps present evidence of past difficulty with authority. One may also be granted an exemption for unsuitability while already in the military through incessant insubordination resulting in repeated (but relatively short) terms in military prison.

The final exemption is a medical one, in which one must demonstrate disability so severe as to prevent any service, even noncombat. There are some who are able to demonstrate corporeal disability on this level, but most who are trying to be released on this basis find it easier to feign psychiatric problems. These could include any number of conditions, but depression is the most common. Shira entered the induction center intending to be released on the grounds of either unsuitability or a medical problem. She ultimately received a medical exemption.

Although information on exemption categories is relatively easy to find, the criteria for these exemptions, and how these criteria are evaluated by actual military bureaucrats, is

not publicly available information. More so, the letter of the defense laws on this issue is extremely general, reserving all discretion regarding exemptions to the military. As a result, informal army policy shifts frequently, often due to political considerations. The criteria for certain exemptions can be tightened or loosened due to public relations concerns; for example, exemptions for pacifism became much more difficult to attain after a number of applicants received a great deal of media attention in 2003. This is consistent with what Ariel Dloomy describes as the IDF's "strategy of not having a strategy" (2005, 708). This means that the IDF does not release information on its policies, or exemption criteria or decisions, in order to maintain its own discretionary authority and deal with cases of draft evasion however it sees fit. This lack of planning is intentionally designed to create illegibility. An officer from the legal division confirmed to me that the law gives the military almost complete discretion regarding exemptions, and it did not want to restrict itself by codifying specific policy. Thus, draft evaders do not spend their time combing over rules and regulations, which are minimal, but rather study bureaucratic practices.

In trying to evade service, a recruit needs to fit into one of these categories of exemption. Not every person can perform every script. Rather, it is most effective to tailor one's self-presentation to existing prejudice and adopt the "exemptible" social stereotype closest to your identity. For example, if you are a male Mizrahi (a Jew of Middle Eastern background) from a poor area, you might most effectively play to stereotypes of being delinquent, hostile to authority, and unable to adjust to institutional life. A wealthy, female Ashkenazi might have difficulty making such a narrative convincing, but presenting a personal narrative of extreme fragility or depression would more readily fit cultural expectations. Depending on the identity of the recruit, delinquency, inability to cope with authority, drug abuse, violence, fragility, depression, and effeminate behavior might all serve as possible reasons to push a bureaucrat toward a release from service. Recruits feign exemption criteria, but their performance is usually based in reality. The persona presented makes use of real markers of identity, and tailors them to the presumed expectations of the bureaucrats. In line with Erving Goffman's (1959) work on self-presentation, recruits seek to control the impression they make on bureaucrats by adjusting their appearance and mode of interaction. Issues of self-representation are not unique to this case, but constant in bureaucratic and institutional settings.⁸

Although New Profile is an activist organization, and most of my interlocutors were likewise politically engaged, the forum seeks to maintain ideological neutrality. Visitors are not asked to conform to New Profile's feminist antimilitarism in order to discuss avoiding military service, which allows this knowledge to be employed beyond the middle-class, urban leftists that comprise its core volunteers. Young people from other demographic groups frequently make use of the online information and receive counseling from experts. In my fieldwork, I encountered Mizrahi Jews, Ashkenazi Jews, Russian and Ethiopian immigrants, those from the peripheries, and those from a wide range of socioeconomic statuses who made recourse to this database. This diversity is significant for several reasons. One concerns the demographics of military refusal. Middle- and upper-class Ashkenazi Jews comprise nearly all of the open public refusals to serve in the military. In part, they are able to take this public stance because their hegemonic status provides them the material and symbolic capital to do so (Weiss 2014). Despite the public nature of their refusal, middle- and upper-class Ashkenazi Jews do not avoid military service in greater numbers than other groups. The diversity represented on the forum thus allows an examination of the evasion strategies of other demographic groups. In addition, examining evasion strategies also offers access to ideological diversity. Many people using the forum do not support the leftist political ideology of the organization that provides the platform. Many are not

primarily concerned with the Occupation, but do not want to serve for other reasons, such as economic problems, intra-Jewish discrimination (Amor 2010), or discomfort with authority.

Even though the knowledge is spread and used by diverse groups, it is not available to everyone. Those who are marginalized linguistically, educationally, or geographically have fewer opportunities to access this information. To make effective use of this knowledge requires different types of literacy, such as is linguistic; that is, this information is largely available only in Hebrew, and as such new immigrants may have difficulty with the sometimes-overwhelming amount of information presented.⁹ Much of the information is distributed online, which means that computer literacy (and access) is also a serious prerequisite for use. Finally, one must have a certain degree of bureaucratic fluency and competency in order to use this knowledge, a skill that is not evenly distributed across socioeconomic groups in Israel. For example, in order to use the typology of military functionaries, one must be familiar with these bureaucratic concepts.

Returning the Gaze

The knowledge accumulated on the forum regarding military exemption is ethnographic in nature, concerning not only formal rules of military exemption, but also how these formal rules are interpreted and diverge from military practice. This information is gathered from what amounts to extended collaborative fieldwork conducted by those young people who, in going through the recruitment process, contribute their experiences to the growing body of knowledge. This ongoing data collection allows recruits to keep abreast of the latest changes in both formal policy and in the shifting interpretation of this policy, as well as the changing bureaucratic and political culture of the offices, including the discrepancies between different offices in the various induction bases. An example of such a change reported during my fieldwork was that claiming certain exemptions used to enable recruits to skip some parts of the recruitment process, but the policy changed to require them to submit to all tests, whether or not they would ultimately receive exemptions. This may seem like a minor change, but in reality this created a significant new pitfall, requiring an additional layer that a recruit needed to negotiate in a way that was consistent with the claims they had made regarding their eligibility for exemption.

The goal of recruits seeking exemption is to cause the military bureaucracy to formally classify them as problematic in order to become eligible for exemption. On enlistment day, a recruit goes through what is called the induction chain. Here, the recruit moves from one station to the next, where a large amount of biometric information is collected: blood and saliva samples, fingerprints, and dental X-rays. Also, shots are administered, equipment is distributed, and soldiers are paid their first salary. The goal of those who want to evade service is to break out of the induction chain in order to be seen by military bureaucrats who can authorize their exemption. This requires them to interrupt the induction process, enabling supervisors to single them out for special treatment. This is contrary to the organizing rationale of the induction chain—standardization—and as such requires significant effort.

One of the forms of knowledge produced through the collective effort of draft evaders is a typology of bureaucrats whom young recruits will encounter at the induction center as they seek an exemption. This flexible typology allows recruits to characterize the bureaucrats they will need to engage. It was created through the cooperative documentation of the experiences of other recruits as they encountered different types of bureaucratic personalities. Based on certain telltale signs, the typology allows recruits to quickly categorize the bureaucrat they are encountering based on age, gender, and a few initial exchanges, which in turn, allows them to make educated guesses about the bureaucrat's personal and

professional motivations. Interestingly, creating such a typology appropriates bureaucratic forms and techniques in order to strategize against the bureaucracy.

As recruits move through the various stages of enlistment, they encounter a wide range of bureaucratic personality types, each of which calls for a different strategy and mode of engagement in order to progress. Many times, the first individuals recruits encounter are young soldiers, only a few years older than themselves, who are in charge of shuttling recruits through the induction chain. This type is the *jobnik*, a term not unique to the forum but rather to a broader concept in Israeli society referring to a soldier who is noncombat and not on a professional track, a position with little prestige that stereotypes the conscript as unmotivated. Recruits seeking exemption are warned that the *jobnik*'s sole motivation is not to take on any extra work. Their job is to move recruits to the next station in the induction chain, and the more smoothly this happens, the less hassle it is for them. They do not want to have get their supervisor, or slow down the process of moving recruits along. As a result, recruits are warned that this soldier may often lie to them, and tell them, for example, that it is impossible to speak with someone about exemption before they have completed the induction chain (or at least the next step in the chain), which is not the case. On the forum, it is advised that this type should be dealt with by standing firm and remaining insistent.

Another type they might encounter is the soldier serving reserve duty, *miluimnik* in Hebrew. After their basic service of three years, men and some women are required to serve up to a month a year in reserve duty, usually until the age of 45. Young people are told that a *miluimnik* is a welcome sight for a recruit seeking exemption. Such assessments reflect a cultural trope that reserve duty is done grudgingly, reflecting the fact that these soldiers would often prefer to be at home with family and not be absent from their normal employment.

Part of achieving exemption is finding the path of least resistance out the door. As part-time and uninvested bureaucrats, reserve soldiers often will not go above and beyond to hinder a quest for exemption. One of the bureaucratic roles likely to be filled by a reserve soldier is as a psychiatrist, who must approve an exemption based on mental unfitness for duty. I have heard recruits reminded by consultants that the motivations of this bureaucrat are entirely on the side of granting exemption, which was confirmed to me when I had the chance to interview several reserve psychiatrists. In this situation, the psychiatrist on reserve duty is faced with a young person claiming psychological distress, in some cases even threatening self-harm or suicide. He or she has little reason to take the risk of keeping such recruits in the military, and great motivation to release them. A psychiatrist explained to me that subsequent self-harm of a recruit would not only weigh on his conscience, it might also jeopardize his "real life" reputation and career. Further, he believed there was the possibility that he could be held legally responsible as a private doctor for such a decision, even though he was acting as an agent of the state.

A third type cannot be identified by age or position but is often quickly identifiable during one-on-one interaction. This category is referred to by the Israeli slang term: *me'ural* (poisoned) soldier. This refers to a promilitary zealot, as in, "poisoned" by ideology. Though this sounds negative, it is actually embraced as a badge of honor by many soldiers. The term characterizes a person who believes that all Jewish Israelis should sacrifice for the state, and that the ultimate form of self-sacrifice is embodied in military service.

Clearly, a poisoned soldier is very unsympathetic to those seeking exemption, and might represent a threat by his or her willingness to go above and beyond the standard bureaucratic responsibilities in order to keep young people in the military. During one of the consulting sessions, Ori, an expert, had just finished describing the experiences of a young man who

encountered a poisoned soldier, who took it upon himself as a personal project to keep this young man in the military, following his case obsessively, and making life very difficult for him. Seeing the flushed look on the face of Adam, who came to get information about exemptions, Ori tried to reassure him: “Don’t worry, if you meet one of these guys you just need to embody all the things that will disgust him—be weak, nervous, neurotic, effeminate—and he will think you are not worthy of the honor of military service. . . . But still, it is better to avoid this type.”

Consultants and the forum both warn that the most dangerous type is so precisely because it is unexpected. Although there is not a singular name used for this type, it can be described as the concerned do-gooder. Frequently, this type is encountered in the mental health officer, the *kaban* in Hebrew, who is the first step toward a mental health exemption. Recruits may have several meetings with a *kaban* before they know whether they will be recommended for exemption. Often the disposition of the concerned do-gooder is sympathetic, but exemption seekers are warned that, against their strong instincts to rely on a friendly face, they should not be cooperative with this type of bureaucrat. The reason is, despite the good intentions of the do-gooder, in Israeli society there is a strong belief that what is best for a young person is to do military service, which is thought to confer many social and psychological benefits. Thus, while such figures will listen with interest and will, seemingly unbureaucratically, spend a great deal of time with a recruit seeking exemption, they will ultimately try to talk a recruit into serving, and the more time engaged in sincere conversation, the more time a recruit is exposed to the well-honed persuasive techniques of the *kaban*. For example, a *kaban* will often encourage young recruits seeking exemption to try military service for a short time, promising that after a few weeks, if they still cannot adjust, the *kaban* will help them get an exemption. It is very tempting to agree to this, in order to demonstrate a good-faith effort supporting the recruit’s claims that it is not just a matter of preference but an inability to serve. However, once one enlists, it is extremely difficult from that point on to get an exemption, something the *kaban* does not mention.

This typology of bureaucrats has several theoretical implications for understanding the bureaucratic practice. Much of the existing literature follows Michel De Certeau’s (1984) distinction, which reserves strategic approaches for institutions and structures of power and tactical approaches for ordinary citizens. In his formulation, ordinary citizens are able to use tactical opportunities for resistance to power, but these moments are defensive, momentary, impromptu, and ultimately remain within the rules established by institutions. The case considered here challenges any strict categorization of this kind. To avoid state control, Israeli draft evaders use organized and premeditated bureaucratic practices of surveying. On the one hand, it must be said that these practices remain somewhat tactical in that they are defensive and do not change, or even seek to change, the rules on of the game. They exempt only the individual applicant, and so produce almost no political consequences for the military or the state. This can be contrasted with public refusal of military service (punished with jail time), which, on the other hand, makes a public statement and openly challenges the military and the ethics of its practices. However, the creation of typologies and best practices guidelines suggest these efforts are no longer simply the impromptu exploitation of opportunities. Rather, this is a strategic approach to resisting state control.

This typology allows recruits a kind of bureaucratic expertise as they seek to accomplish their goals of exemption from service. The encounter with the military is structured such that recruits are assumed to have no expertise, and are completely passive and transparent throughout the process. Those who seek exemption, however, engage in undeclared expertise, even feigning passivity. This encounter is seen through a closer consideration of Shira’s experiences.

Shira's Encounter

Shira's interactions with the military began months before I accompanied her to the induction center. One day she arrived at a New Profile meeting in a panic. "It's red!" she yelled, waving a piece of paper. Shira had followed best practices, ignoring the first, polite overtures of the military instructing her to respond for the initial stages of the recruitment process, but now she was receiving more threatening messages. One of the leaders explained to the group that if you respond to the first notice, you would paint a picture of yourself as a model citizen who obediently responds to state demands, and the state would not be motivated to release you. One should skip the primary notice and not show up for the first tests. The leader said, "You need to create a problematic persona in the 'mind' of the institution." He explained that by not answering, the military has to make you a special case, and then expend resources trying to find and deal with you. A person's silence presents a hassle for the state.

Shira had the benefit of entering the induction experience after extensive preparatory training. I asked her to describe her experiences at the induction center. She told me that upon arrival, she first encountered a young soldier:

He was just a jobnik and already out of patience at the beginning of the day. I told him I wanted to see a kaban. He said that was fine, and I could see a kaban after I go through the induction chain. He literally pushed me forward and I found myself walking on. Then I stopped, and thought, "If I didn't know that he was lying, I would have obeyed him." The forum gave me the realization that I can just say no, and there is nothing they can do about it. So I went back and I told him, "No, I want to see a kaban now." And he looked at me, and I said it with such confidence and like I know what I am talking about that he went and got his boss or commander or whatever.

Handelman (2004) has observed the ways in which Israelis are trained from childhood into bureaucratic logic and behavior that will ultimately serve the state, and Shira's bureaucratic training was strong indeed. Over time, I saw that through the guidance of best practices, Shira slowly moved from expressing intimidation at what she perceived to be the nearly omnipotent authority of the military, to seeing the institution as an imperfect bureaucracy that she might actually be able to manipulate. She told me, "I was going through it like playing a video game, and it was like, each new person I met was a new level with its own theme. And that helped me be more analytical and not panic."

Shira was taken out of the induction chain and spoke with someone whose position she did not know. She explained, "I only gave them the mantra." By mantra, she was referring to the statement she was advised to offer without elaboration: "I cannot be inducted, I want to see a kaban." The person asked her why she could not be inducted, but she refused to answer. From the forum, I learned that this refusal of explanation serves several purposes. One is to avoid narrowing the options for exemption by pursuing one at the expense of the other possibilities. Another is to avoid revealing a familiarity with the exemption criteria, which would raise suspicion. Most importantly, the refusal to answer such a question enables the recruit to avoid being drawn into a conversation in which many have been "sweet-talked," or alternatively threatened, into enlistment. Not getting anything from Shira other than her insistence that she cannot be inducted, the officer moved Shira to a room she understood to be for abnormal cases. She waited there for more than two hours. She said, "My instincts told me to panic, but I knew it was a strategy on their side." Two more officers spoke to Shira, asking her why she could not serve. To each she shrugged, and said, "I just can't."

The officials got frustrated with her, and told her if she did not cooperate they could not help her, and that she would not see the kaban unless she explained why she could not serve. Shira refused to cooperate or explain herself.

Finally, they told her that they were taking her to see the kaban, but she waited in a hallway for more than three hours. When she finally saw the kaban, she spoke with her for more than an hour. In the weeks proceeding, Shira had rehearsed this interaction time and again. Avoiding pitfalls that might imperil her chances for exemption took a while for Shira to master. She told the kaban she would not be able to cope with life in the military, that she was depressed. The kaban asked a lot of questions, and although Shira is an articulate young woman, she was careful not to be too coherent in her answers, so as not to fall into any traps, such as those that would be inconsistent with depression or would commit her to going through the enlistment process. She explained, “At some point I managed to cry; that was good. I was just so tired at that point that it was not that hard.”

Shira reported that the kaban was a classic, concerned, do-gooder figure:

It was really hard because she was so sincere, and she wanted to help me, so it’s the kind of person your instincts tell you to trust because they are on your side. But to her, helping me succeed was helping me cope in the military, so I resisted and I didn’t tell her anything.

The kaban asked her what she would do if she were not in the military. In reality, Shira planned to go straight into her studies, but instead she stuck to a persona of low motivation, saying that she had no idea what she would do; she just knew she could not serve in the military. It worked. The kaban told her she would have to come back the next day to speak with a psychiatrist.¹⁰ Shira returned the next day, but the psychiatrist only spent a few minutes with her. She was released.

Flipping the Script on Bureaucracy

The picture of bureaucracy revealed in this account is not unfamiliar, and all of the interactions described recall recognizable forms of bureaucratic administration. However, the outcome of a client besting a state agency is not one often heard. I argue that the IDF is not exceptional in this respect; rather, the same characteristics of bureaucracy that frustrate clients in other places also manifest in this case. Considering a few contrasting examples will help illustrate this point.

Unresponsiveness is a prime example of one way that draft evaders exploit the defining characteristics of bureaucracy; in this case, bureaucratic limbo. In *Black Boxes of Bureaucracy*, Marnie Jane Thomson (2012) follows the case of a refugee family seeking permanent relocation, who are frequently left waiting for the UN relocation administration to make a decision, for the bureaucrats to contact them, and to be informed whether or not they are moving on to the next stage of the process. Heath Cabot follows the effects of legal limbo on the lives of refugees in Greece, and finds that “asylum seekers thus are suspended in limbo (1) between multiple bureaucratic stages conveying possible acceptance, rejection, or appeal and (2) between divergent possible outcomes for their cases entailing extremely different legal trajectories” (2012, 17). In many bureaucratic encounters, people are left for an indeterminate amount of time—months or even years—without knowing their citizenship, benefits, rights, or legal status. However, in this case, the recruits use limbo to their own benefit. By not responding to the recruitment instructions, they create a kind of bureaucratic limbo that becomes the state’s problem. Here, the burden of this limbo falls to the bureaucrats to figure out how, and if, a case will proceed. The state acts like a client, pestering the recruit and trying to get their attention with bold, red letters.

Similarly, the intentional unresponsiveness of draft evaders is an example of draft evaders exploiting the defining characteristics of bureaucracy; in this case, bureaucratic opacity. The scholarly literature on bureaucracy frequently highlights the ways in which the ideology of bureaucratic rationality and transparency often produces the opposite effects (Herzfeld 1992). Veena Das has observed that the illegibility of the state—the unreadability of its rules and practices—gives the state much of its power and maintains its ability to oscillate between its rational and magical modes (2007, 166). The state obscures itself and only manifests in discrete signatures, not revealing the particulars of its power in order to maintain the illusion of omnipotence. Israeli draft evaders make full use of the opaque and circumscribed setting of their bureaucratic encounter and the fact that a bureaucrat necessarily has constrained knowledge—nothing beyond skeletal details—of their intentions or practices outside the induction center. They avoid engagement and give barely coherent responses to inquiries. They do not voluntarily reveal particularities of their lives, their political inclinations, their ambitions, their social lives, or any of the other details that would give the state insight and allow it to exercise control. In order to dominate through knowledge, the military needs this information.

Rigidity is another bureaucratic characteristic that is exploited by draft evaders. Scholars of bureaucracies often find that clients are rigidly categorized into predetermined identities. Such identities index moral categories, such as worthy and unworthy poor (Sales 2002), humanitarian victims (Fassin and Rechtman 2009), welfare cheats and freeloaders (Silver 2010), drug addicts (Prussing 2008), and so on. Many anthropologists lament categorization into simplistic identities that do not account for the complexities that fieldworkers see through deeper involvement in the life worlds of their interlocutors (Malkki 1996). For example, bureaucratic categories might reflect a misrecognition of cultural differences that produce suspicion, for example, in the norms of narration (Fassin 2008; Mattingly 2008) or in patterns of family relations (Thomson 2012). Such rigid categories of acceptable identities often pose a constraint on clients who are either unable to meet the criteria of a positive identity or otherwise misrecognized by bureaucrats. In the case study of this article, however, rigid categories actually offer a script for young people to follow. Those who want to evade military service are able to learn the criteria of exempted identities and simulate them in their bureaucratic encounter. Because of the large number of recruits, and the large number of exemptions granted, there are limited options for in-depth bureaucratic inquiry, and a rigid checklist allows my interlocutors to effectively target the key markers of an “unrecruitable” identity.

Finally, in the literature it is widely accepted that bureaucratic encounters produce bureaucratic subjectivities. This is largely related to administrative exertions in citizenship pedagogy that aim to train people to see bureaucratic encounters as empowering them as individuals. In his investigations into everyday corruption in northern India, Akhil Gupta (1995) notes that high performative competence is required to make one’s way through the grey zones of bureaucratic interaction. Training in literacy (Cody 2009), bureaucratic narrativization, and legal and rights consciousness (Goodale and Merry 2007; Merry 1990) are central themes of this literature. Such efforts serve to make persons more legible to the state (Scott 1998). Likewise, many scholars examine efforts to transform people with an apathetic relationship to the state into citizens (Bach 2010; Idrus 2010; Postero 2007). For example, in his research on would-be development NGOs seeking official status, Bretton Alvaré (2010) demonstrates how engagement with the state produces self-monitoring in matters of compliance, and even bureaucratic habitus. Among draft evaders, there is certainly modification of subjectivity that results from bureaucratic encounter, but it is often achieved in concert with the disenchantment of the state, rather than through its

establishment as an avenue of personal fulfillment. As Shira began to pay attention to the “man behind the curtain,”¹¹ that is, to consider the actual bureaucrats and their practices, the state lost much of its magic and coercive authority. The engagement with the state, instead of imbuing the subject with reverence for bureaucratic authority, has the opposite effect: deactivating ingrained beliefs about the necessity for obedience.

Conclusion

This article examined what happens when clients conduct surveillance on a state’s bureaucracy, rather than the other way around. I analyzed the ways young Israelis seeking to evade military service document and amass a body of knowledge on the state’s bureaucratic practices. These young people survey and document military bureaucratic practices themselves, thus effectively returning the gaze of the state. Reluctant recruits mimic bureaucratic logic to best the system and flip the script on techniques of state control. They do this by exploiting formal and informal regulations, procedural vulnerabilities, disparate motivations of functionaries, and the limitations of government time and resources. Though Weber (1946) suggested bureaucracy takes the form of control through knowledge, this can be read in several ways. This statement not only reveals bureaucracy’s force, but also its vulnerability, as accurate knowledge can elude the state.

In my analysis, I show that the very characteristics of bureaucracy that so often infuriate clients can also be used to work against it. Draft avoiders displace the burden of bureaucratic limbo back to the state by refusing to respond to official demands, thus actively labeling themselves as problematic cases. They also redeploy bureaucratic opacity by withholding relevant information, making themselves illegible. As in Shira’s case, step by step, bureaucrats gave in as she called the bluff on their bureaucratic authority, until she was finally released. Similarly, while rigid stereotypes often hinder clients, for Shira and her cohort, such categories could be mobilized into a script for success. Finally, I suggest that exposure to the minutiae of bureaucratic practices produces a shift from reverence to irreverence, reversing state pedagogical efforts.

This case study confirms that bureaucratic knowledge is a powerful tool. Those seeking to evade military service have constructed an archive of collectively gathered information, from which they have derived both a typology of military bureaucratic personalities and a set of best practices for being granted an exemption from the Israeli Defense Forces. However, this case also demonstrates that the power of bureaucratic practices is not only the domain of the state. Bureaucratic authority is more commonly associated with institutions of governance and sovereign control, but this is not necessarily the case. Here, when the clients of the military bureaucracy produce bureaucratic knowledge, they are able to resist state control beyond opportunistic and spontaneous tactics. Observing that bureaucratic practices are not exclusively associated with state power invites an exploration into bureaucratic practices as potential practices of resistance rather than those of control.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. In this article I choose not to reveal many of the details of the strategies and techniques of my interlocutors in order to protect them and to not endanger their practices. For example, though consultants are only minimally organized, I am purposefully vague about their identity and the ways they can be found by recruits. All of the techniques and advice I describe here are ones that have been disseminated and publicized on the Internet forum in Hebrew. This information has long been viewed by the military.

3. I use the term citizen to refer to the relationship between the individual and the state, and client to refer to the relationship between the individual and the bureaucracy.
4. This follows in the tradition of riffs on James Scott's book *Seeing Like a State* (1998).
5. Today, there are few countries in the world that have mandatory military service. Among those that do, military service can often be substituted with a civilian alternative. As a result, the issue of avoiding the draft is particularly fraught in Israel. Palestinian Israelis, except for Druze and Bedouins, are exempted from service automatically.
6. It was decided early in the history of the state that ultra-orthodox citizens would be exempt from military service because it is incompatible with their lifestyle.
7. Most people who are exempt from service know early in life that they will not serve, but I was specifically observing those debating whether or not to serve, so most of my interlocutors did not come from religious communities.
8. For example, Vincent Dubois (2010) describes the way French welfare clients exploit their opportunities to influence welfare agents, and E. Summerson Carr (2010) demonstrates the way addicts in Midwest United States conform to the therapeutic language of addiction in order to elicit the cooperation of case managers, from housing to child custody. The addicts Carr describes refer to the use of therapeutic discourse to achieve their goals as "flipping the script," a phrase I find apt to describe the way my interlocutors redeploy military categories of classification to achieve exemption.
9. Inquiries in weak or incorrect Hebrew are given generous treatment online.
10. Kabans with a background in psychology can recommend a release directly, but if they have a background in social work, a recruit needs to see a psychiatrist.
11. "Man behind the curtain" refers to *The Wizard of Oz*, by Frank Baum.

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