



Digital Humor of Young Bureaucrats as an Agency in the Transformation of Indonesian Bureaucracy

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the agency of young bureaucrats in the transformation of Indonesian bureaucracy through the lens of Žižekian subject theory. Employing a qualitative approach, it examines their critical discourse, particularly as expressed through the Instagram account @asnmasasaja. The findings underscore the potential of young bureaucrats as transformative agents within bureaucratic structures. Their humor-laden critiques of hierarchical norms and entrenched practices reveal a dialectical tension between the imaginary and symbolic phases of subject formation. While these critiques affirm their agency and resistance to the status quo, a critical gap remains between their symbolic contestations and their ability to enact tangible reforms—what Žižek conceptualizes as the 'Real phase.' Despite their incisive critiques and clear frustrations, these young bureaucrats struggle to translate their insights into concrete bureaucratic change, leaving them trapped within the symbolic order of the system. This study contributes to discussions on bureaucracy, humor, and critique through a Žižekian philosophical framework, illustrating the limitations of digital resistance in driving structural transformation. It offers a nuanced understanding of how young bureaucrats navigate the contradictions of power, bureaucracy, ideology, and institutional constraints.

INTRODUCTION

The role of agencies in the context of bureaucratic reform has consistently garnered the attention of scholars. Among these agencies are street-level bureaucrats. Lee & Park (2021) found that lower-level bureaucrats exhibit a higher propensity to implement reforms initiated by elected officials when these reforms align with their policy positions and when they perceive an increased freedom to exercise discretion. Belabas & Gerrits (2017) discovered that lower-level bureaucrats are willing to deviate from policy rules to assist clients under specific conditions, such as when clients display high motivation, exert extreme personal pressure, or when negative judgments are cast upon existing policies and instruments. Ricks (2017) emphasized the pivotal role of street bureaucrats in implementing policy reforms for service co-production based on extensive field research conducted in Thailand and Indonesia. Aldrich & Rudman (2020) proposed that occupational therapists, functioning as street-level bureaucrats, respond to interrelated policies and systems in ways that can perpetuate, deny, or alter opportunities for actions and identities, thus accentuating the inherently political nature of their practice. Cumulatively, this body of research underscores the significance of street-level bureaucrats in implementing bureaucratic reforms, highlighting the multifaceted influences shaping their responses.

While the literature on street-level bureaucracy has extensively examined discretion, coping mechanisms, and frontline decision-making, it rarely interrogates how generational location may shape bureaucratic agency. Age matters theoretically because it reflects not merely a biological attribute but a socio-institutional position within bureaucratic hierarchies. Young bureaucrats often occupy structurally distinct positions characterized by limited formal authority, probationary career stages, and high exposure to digital communication

environments (Y. Lee et al., 2026; Mustafa et al., 2022). These conditions potentially shape how they interpret institutional norms, express critique, and mobilize networks. In this sense, generational identity can function as a governance variable: it influences how bureaucrats perceive reform agendas, engage with public discourse, and negotiate institutional constraints. The rise of digitally connected young civil servants therefore invites a reconsideration of street-level bureaucracy through the lens of generational agency, particularly as new forms of expression emerge through social media platforms.

However, conventional public administration theories tend to analyze bureaucrats primarily through institutional incentives, organizational rules, or behavioral motivations. Such approaches often overlook the deeper ideological structures that shape how bureaucrats understand their roles within the state. Here, Slavoj Žižek's theoretical perspective offers an alternative analytical lens. Drawing on the Lacanian triad of the imaginary, symbolic, and the real, Žižek allows us to examine bureaucracy not merely as an administrative system but as a symbolic order sustained by shared fantasies, norms, and ideological expectations. This perspective enables the analysis to move beyond formal institutional explanations and explore how bureaucrats internalize, reproduce, or disrupt dominant narratives about state authority, reform, and professionalism. In the context of digitally active young bureaucrats, Žižek's framework helps reveal how humor, satire, and critique on social media may function as subtle forms of ideological dislocation within bureaucratic culture.

Bureaucratic reform in Indonesia has yielded commendable best practices, albeit with sporadic implementation in select domains (Turner et al., 2022). While efforts at renewal and fostering a culture of innovation have made strides, they have yet to become widespread, hindering citizens' interactions with the

bureaucracy (Andhika, 2017). Consequently, public grievances have become increasingly commonplace. Moreover, the Indonesian bureaucratic landscape continues to grapple with the persistent issue of corruption, which erodes the system's integrity. According to a report by the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK), between January 1 and October 20, 2022, there were 31 corruption cases implicating echelon I/II/III officials. As of October 20, 2022, these corrupt individuals at the echelon I/II/III level accounted for 39.24% of the total 79 perpetrators of corruption in Indonesia (Annur, 2022).

As highlighted in extant scholarship, one recurring challenge in bureaucratic performance is the human resources issue (Gaus et al., 2017). Conversely, the bureaucratic reform agenda aspires not only to modernize state institutions and mitigate inefficiencies in public sector governance but also to foster dynamic collaborations among stakeholders to enhance the quality of public services (Bekkers & Tummers, 2018; Chapman, 2019; Meier et al., 2019). In essence, bureaucratic change transcends internal restructuring; it is also outward-looking, aiming to cultivate a democratic environment that ensures decision-making processes related to public interests are consistently underpinned by genuine community participation (Michels & de Graaf, 2010).

Bureaucratic reform has emerged as a global imperative, confronting nations worldwide (Penger & Tekavcic, 2008; Rahadian, 2013). In light of these formidable reform expectations, finding common ground to engage disinterested human resources in the organizational process presents a formidable challenge. However, taking the competence of bureaucrats for granted is an equally untenable proposition. The performance and mindset of bureaucrats can evolve through continuous training, fostering an understanding that their work is pivotal in the nation's life. The bureaucracy serves as the linchpin of a nation's success or failure (Agger & Sørensen, 2016).

Examining the role of the individual within the bureaucratic framework necessitates a critical perspective firmly rooted in the concept of emancipation. Humans, as integral components of the broader social order, exhibit a degree of vulnerability (Butler, 2016; Sheikh, 2017). Invariably, the course of history often eludes individual control, mirroring the complexities inherent in the performance of the Indonesian bureaucracy. While bureaucrats frequently find themselves subject to societal critique, the prospect of effecting improvements remains viable, particularly within the public organizations they serve. Nevertheless, an omnipresent "Big Other" constrains these officials' attempts to rectify bureaucratic shortcomings (Jiang, 2022). In the contemporary landscape, a notable phenomenon has emerged: networks of young bureaucrats affiliated with various communities via social media platforms. These networks exemplify agency, actively engaging in initiatives to instigate change within the bureaucratic apparatus.

Social media platforms have increasingly become informal arenas where bureaucrats' express experiences and frustrations that cannot easily be articulated within formal organizational channels. Among these platforms, Instagram provides a particularly distinctive communicative environment. Unlike text-dominated platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Instagram relies heavily on visual formats such as memes, short videos, and humorous imagery. These formats enable users to convey critique through satire, irony, and storytelling while maintaining a degree of ambiguity that reduces direct confrontation with institutional authority. As a result, humor-

based content on Instagram becomes a subtle yet powerful medium for expressing bureaucratic dissent.

Table 1. Networking Young Bureaucrats on Instagram

No	Instagram	Profile information	Followers
1	@abdimuda_id	A forum for young civil servants who want to encourage a smart, creative, and contributive mindset	77,4K
2	@abdinegaramuda	Integrity, Collaborative, Productive, Helpful	8.200
3	@aparturmuda.id	Integrity, synergy, innovation	7.789
4	@asnbiasasaja	Mixed stories about Indonesia's Young Bureaucrats Call us Umbies	93,2K
5	@asnation.id	ASN forum to share & inspire each other	15,6K

Source: Processed by Researchers (2024)

The emergence of this network community of young bureaucrats injects fresh perspectives into Indonesia's bureaucratic reform landscape, as it articulates contemporary aspirations and ideas in opposition to entrenched, hierarchical, and bureaucratic conventions. Though not inherently fragmentary, their presence boldly asserts a distinctive identity: "We are the young bureaucrats!" Through the vehicle of humorous content and posts, these young Indonesian bureaucrats' package diverse experiences into engaging critiques of their peers.

Instagram, a prominent social media platform renowned for facilitating the sharing of photos and videos and enabling interactions via comments, likes, direct messages, and stories, plays a pivotal role in this phenomenon. With over one billion monthly active users worldwide, Instagram particularly resonates with the younger demographic (Newton, 2021). In Indonesia, Instagram ranks as the second most widely used social media platform, following Facebook, boasting over 80 million users as of 2020 (Statista, 2023).

Among the emerging online communities of Indonesian civil servants, the @asnbiasasaja account occupies a particularly prominent position. With more than 93,000 followers, it represents one of the largest digital communities centered on the everyday experiences of young bureaucrats. The account frequently shares humorous posts, memes, and short narratives

depicting bureaucratic life, including issues related to hierarchy, seniority, and workplace culture. Its popularity suggests that these narratives resonate with a broader audience of civil servants who recognize similar experiences in their own professional environments. For this reason, @asnbiasasaja provides a valuable empirical site for examining how young bureaucrats collectively articulate critiques of bureaucratic practices through digital humor.

This study contributes to the literature on bureaucratic reform and street-level bureaucracy in three ways. First, it introduces generational dynamics into the analysis of bureaucratic agency by examining how early-career bureaucrats interpret and critique hierarchical organizational structures. Second, it expands the study of bureaucratic politics into digital environments, demonstrating how social media platforms function as emerging arenas for bureaucratic discourse and collective identity formation. Third, by applying Žižek's theory of subject formation, this research provides a critical-ideological perspective that reveals how bureaucratic authority is reproduced and contested through symbolic practices such as humor and satire.

Building on these considerations, this study addresses the following research questions:

- How do young bureaucrats articulate critiques of bureaucratic culture through humor on social media?
- What forms of bureaucratic frustration and power relations are reflected in these digital expressions?
- How can these expressions be interpreted through Žižek's framework of the imaginary, symbolic, and real?

By answering these questions, the study aims to provide a deeper understanding of how emerging forms of digital expression among young bureaucrats reveal the ideological tensions embedded within contemporary bureaucratic systems.

METHOD

This study utilizes Instagram data to analyze the critiques of young Indonesian bureaucrats. However, it is essential to acknowledge the inherent limitations of this data source. Instagram does not provide a representative sample of the broader population, as user demographics are influenced by factors such as age, gender, education, income, geographical location, and internet access. Additionally, the reliability and validity of Instagram data are not always assured due to potential biases like social desirability, self-presentation, and manipulation. Ethical and accessibility concerns also arise, as data availability is subject to privacy settings, platform terms of service, and user consent (Andreotta et al., 2019).

The data collection process focused on the Instagram account @asnbiasasaja, one of the largest online communities discussing the everyday experiences of young Indonesian civil servants. All publicly available posts and comments published between January 2023 and May 2023 were collected for analysis. The dataset consisted of visual posts, captions, and associated user comments. These materials were selected because they represent direct expressions of bureaucratic experiences and reactions from followers who are likely to share similar professional backgrounds.

The analytical process followed a three-stage qualitative content analysis procedure consisting of data collection, thematic coding, and interpretive analysis.

In the first stage, all posts published by the @asnbiasasaja account during the selected period were retrieved manually and archived. Each post included visual content (memes or images), captions, and associated user comments. Posts unrelated to bureaucratic experiences were excluded from the dataset. The final dataset therefore consisted of posts that explicitly addressed bureaucratic life, organizational hierarchies, work culture, and related frustrations experienced by civil servants.

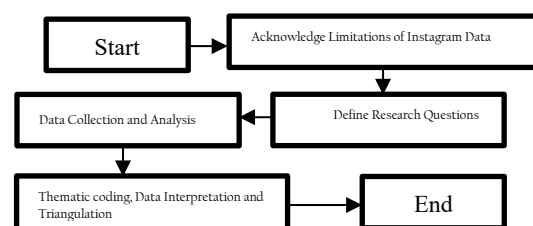
The second stage involved thematic coding of the collected data. The coding process combined inductive and deductive approaches. Deductive coding was initially guided by the theoretical framework of Žižek's subject formation (imaginary, symbolic, and real), which provided a conceptual lens for interpreting expressions of critique and resistance. At the same time, inductive coding was used to identify recurring themes emerging directly from the data.

The coding process was conducted in several steps. First, all posts and comments were read multiple times to familiarize the researchers with the dataset. Second, initial codes were assigned to segments of text and visual narratives that represented recurring patterns of bureaucratic experience, such as hierarchical authority, blame allocation, workplace frustration, and bureaucratic inefficiency. Third, these initial codes were grouped into broader thematic categories through an iterative comparison process. During this stage, a preliminary codebook was developed to ensure consistent categorization of themes across the dataset.

The resulting themes were then interpreted in relation to Žižek's theoretical framework, allowing the analysis to connect empirical observations with the conceptual dimensions of the imaginary, symbolic, and real.

In the final stage, the identified themes were analyzed interpretively to examine how digital humor reflects the experiences and frustrations of young bureaucrats. Particular attention was given to how humor, satire, and irony reveal tensions between formal bureaucratic norms and everyday workplace realities. This stage involved linking empirical themes with the theoretical framework in order to understand how symbolic expressions of critique emerge within bureaucratic environments.

To enhance analytical rigor, the findings were triangulated across multiple forms of data within the Instagram platform. Specifically, the analysis compared visual content, captions, and user comments, allowing the researchers to examine how critiques were expressed by the account administrators and how these critiques were interpreted and reinforced by followers. Patterns of audience engagement, such as recurring comment themes and reactions, were also examined to confirm whether the identified themes resonated across the broader community of users.



Figur 1. Research Process

Source: Processed by Researchers (2024)

Through this multi-layered analytical approach, the study aims to provide a systematic interpretation of how young bureaucrats express and negotiate bureaucratic critique through digital humor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In bureaucratic environments, hierarchical structures and rigid protocols often cultivate feelings of powerlessness and detachment, particularly among young bureaucrats. However, humor emerges as a distinct mode of resistance, leveraging the dissonance between official rhetoric and lived experience. The use of humor within bureaucratic spaces functions as a strategic mechanism to expose underlying contradictions, absurdities, and disparities that might otherwise remain obscured in formal discourse.

Žižek's theory of subject formation builds upon Lacan's framework (Sharpe, 2017), particularly the Lacanian Triad: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. According to Žižek, subjectivity can only be understood through these three interrelated stages. The Imaginary represents what cannot be fully articulated in language and is manifested in fantasy. It is rooted in Lacan's mirror stage, during which an infant first perceives its self-image as distinct from its physical body. This moment creates an internal split, as the ego emerges with an unattainable longing for unity with its reflection. This division persists throughout life, shaping human desire and alienation (Akmal, 2015; Suryajaya, 2014).

The Symbolic phase occurs when an individual becomes fully integrated into language and societal structures. At this stage, the subject is defined by a fundamental "lack," as language can never entirely encapsulate human experience. The subject's identity is shaped by an external force—the "Great Other"—which reinforces hierarchical power relations (Suryajaya, 2014). In contrast, the Real exists beyond language, representing an unattainable pre-linguistic state that the subject perpetually seeks but can never fully access. Reality is continuously mediated through language, trapping individuals in an endless interplay of signifiers and meanings (Žižek, 2009; Yusari, 2012).

Unlike Lacan's relatively static conception of the subject, Žižek emphasizes the possibility of resistance. True subjectivity, he argues, emerges when individuals engage in radical action, directly confronting the impossibility of escaping the Symbolic order. This form of resistance does not seek to achieve the impossible but instead redefines its meaning through action (Robert, 2010).

The analytical lens through which this criticism of bureaucratic practices is scrutinized draws from the subject perspective delineated by Žižek. The following exploration unfolds in tandem with empirical investigations of young bureaucrats conducted via the @asnbiasasaja account, which serves as a conduit for criticism.

Imaginary Phase

The Imaginary Phase encapsulates all that defies linguistic expression—a repository of discussions that have failed to find verbalization. This concept finds resonance in Lacan's notion of the mirror phase, a stage marked by separating the self from its reflection (Akmal, 2015). Within this separation, the subject becomes ensnared in a perpetual state of division (Suryajaya,

2014). The mirror image serves as the crucible for forming the self, albeit a self cleaved into two distinct entities—the self and its self-image (Suryajaya, 2014). However, this phase initiates a trajectory of alienation. Alienation takes root as an individual yearns for a union with the reflection in the mirror, an unquenchable desire for the self-image mirrored in the reflection of life. This unrelenting longing results in the ego's division into two facets—the self and its self-image (Robert, 2010). An enduring void persists within the self due to this unassuaged yearning, and this lacuna becomes an enduring aspect of human existence as individuals persistently strive to bridge the divide.

The Imaginary Phase entails the formation of identity through identification with images and ideals. When examining how young bureaucrats employ humor and jest to critique the bureaucratic system, it becomes evident that they are engaging with the imaginary dimension of their discontent. Jokes function as a means to forge a shared identity (Huber & Brown, 2017) among young bureaucrats by collectively acknowledging and amplifying the inherent absurdities within the bureaucratic framework. This collective laughter fosters a sense of belonging and camaraderie among these individuals, effectively countering the isolation frequently encountered within hierarchical structures.

As an illustrative example, consider the Instagram post dated January 4th, published under the handle "@asnbiasasaja," which encapsulates a form of bureaucratic critique.



Figur 2. @asnbiasasaja's post on hierarchy in bureaucracy [English: If you work well, your boss praises you. If your work is bad, who gets the blame, you know who']

Source: @asnbiasasaja

With 5,055 likes and 152 comments, this post exhibited a wide-reaching appeal, indicative of a shared comprehension of the underlying bureaucratic dynamics cloaked in humor. The substantial engagement, as evidenced by the numerous likes and comments, implies that the post resonated with a considerable audience, encompassing individuals who have directly experienced or observed analogous bureaucratic scenarios. This resonance underscores the widespread recognition of such frustrations, accentuating these issues' pervasiveness within the bureaucratic framework. The utilization of humor in the post effectively fostered a sense of camaraderie among young Indonesian bureaucrats who could readily relate to the depicted scenario. This shared experience engenders a sense of community among individuals who frequently feel isolated within hierarchical, bureaucratic settings.

The statement, "If you work well, your superiors praise you. If your work is bad, who gets the blame, you know who," employs

a satirical tone to underscore a recurring motif within bureaucratic systems—the disproportionate allocation of praise and blame. This observation mirrors a common bureaucratic phenomenon where achievements tend to be ascribed to superiors, while failures are often attributed to subordinates.

The rationale behind consistently creating situations within bureaucracies where success is credited to superiors and failures are assigned to subordinates can be elucidated through the lens of bureaucratic blame avoidance (Pascoe et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2023). This concept encapsulates the proclivity of bureaucrats to evade accountability for unpopular or high-risk decisions, subsequently shifting blame onto others in the event of unfavorable outcomes.

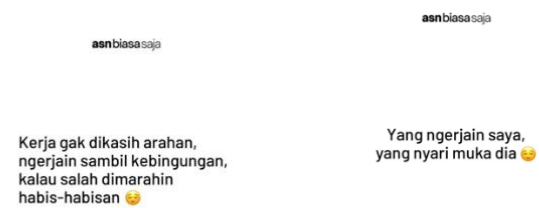
Bureaucrats typically operate under the dual motivations of advancing their careers and averting potential sanctions (Jackall, 2017). Consequently, they often adhere closely to organizational rules and regulations established by higher-ranking authorities while refraining from discretionary decision-making that might render them susceptible to criticism or punitive measures (Tu & Gong, 2022).

When a decision yields a favorable outcome, superiors can readily claim credit by emphasizing their role in establishing governing rules and providing guidance. This tendency is particularly pronounced in contexts where performance information—despite being objective, clear, and unambiguous—can still be interpreted with bias, depending on whether it aligns with the prior beliefs of those receiving the information (Baekgaard & Serritzlew, 2016). Given that superiors both possess and shape these beliefs, they maintain control over how success is framed.

In contrast, subordinates are often relegated to merely acknowledging their compliance with directives, with little recognition for their contributions. Conversely, when a decision results in failure, superiors can readily shift blame onto subordinates, citing errors in rule implementation or procedural missteps. This leaves subordinates with limited means to defend themselves or contest the established regulations. Such a dynamic reinforces the inherent power imbalance within bureaucracies, where superiors exercise greater control over information, resources, and rewards, while subordinates bear a disproportionate share of risks and associated costs (Nyadera & Islam, 2022).

Within a broader context, this dynamic extends beyond bureaucratic hierarchies to political institutions. Politicians, rather than frontline bureaucrats, often receive credit for the performance and effectiveness of street-level bureaucrats, further perpetuating the asymmetry in accountability and recognition (Nielsen & Moynihan, 2017).

By drawing a parallel between responses to favorable and unfavorable work outcomes, this article subtly critiques the hierarchical power structure ingrained within bureaucratic entities. The implied reference to "you know who" implies an unspoken acknowledgment of an entrenched hierarchical hierarchy, wherein accountability tends to cascade downward rather than ascending in the organizational hierarchy (Child, . 2018). Similar posts adopting a comparable theme and tone can be found below:



Figur 3. @asnbiasasaja's post on hierarchy in bureaucracy
[English: Work is not given directions, work while confused, lose mistakes are scolded all the time | I'm the one doing the work, he's the one looking for face.]

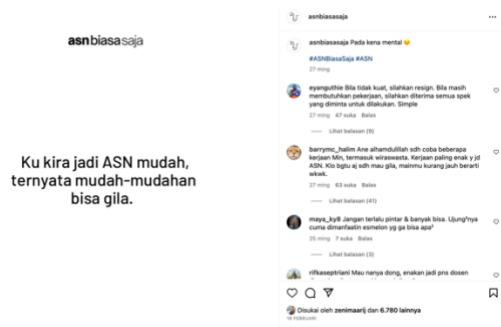
Source: @asnbiasasaja

Symbolic Phase

The symbolic phase pertains to language, legal constructs, and societal norms. It constitutes the reality that has undergone exposure to symbols or, in simpler terms when humans become wholly immersed in the framework of language. Fundamentally, during the mirror phase, a translation of the infant's imagination occurs through the image reflected in the mirror (Nobus, 2018). In this context, it signifies the act of humans situating themselves within the realm of language. Within the symbolic domain, the subject materializes through negations, which Lacan, in this stage, designates as "lack." In this stage, all situations manifest themselves to the Other and the Great Other—a representation of formidable power endowed with the capacity to delineate the human self (Chiesa, 2007).

The criticism of bureaucratic practices via social media can be comprehended as an endeavor to disrupt the prevailing symbolic order. Bureaucracies are characterized by rigid regulations and hierarchies that serve to uphold social order (Diefenbach & Todnem By, 2012; Lapicciarella, 2015). Nevertheless, humor and critique pose a challenge to these established norms. By spotlighting issues associated with seniority, hierarchy, and exploitation, young bureaucrats employ language to unveil the inherent contradictions within the bureaucratic system. This concerted effort questions the legitimacy of the existing symbolic order, intending to stimulate contemplation and potentially ignite transformative change.

The Instagram post shared by @asnbiasasaja on February 18, 2023, appears to embody a form of bureaucratic critique executed by young Indonesian bureaucrats through satire and humor, particularly within the context of the symbolic phase. The widespread popularity of this post, accruing 6,780 likes and eliciting 409 comments, implies a resonance with a substantial portion of the audience, conceivably fellow bureaucrats or individuals conversant with the challenges inherent in public service employment. This level of engagement indicates a shared comprehension of the underlying criticisms interwoven into the post.



Figur 4. @asnbiasasaja's post on symbolic in bureaucracy
[English: I thought it would be easy to be an ASN, but it turns out I wish I could go crazy]
Source: @asnbiasasaja

The symbolic phase denotes the developmental stage at which individuals commence comprehending and engaging with the social and cultural norms and structures inherent in society. This post articulates the burgeoning awareness among young bureaucrats regarding the intricacies and challenges entailed in their roles as civil servants within the Indonesian bureaucracy. It is a symbolic means through which these young bureaucrats navigate and offer commentary on their encounters within this bureaucratic framework.

The sentence, "I thought it would be easy to be an ASN, but it turns out I wish I could go crazy," when examined through the lens of Žižek's perspective on the symbolic phase and subject theory, offers insight into an individual's negotiation with societal norms and expectations.

In the initial segment of the sentence, "I thought it would be easy to be an ASN," individuals unveil their initial expectations, presuming that assuming the role of an ASN (*Aparatur Sipil Negara*) would be straightforward or manageable. This reflects preconceived assumptions or idealized notions concerning the nature of bureaucratic involvement. Žižek's conceptualization of the symbolic phase pertains to the juncture in an individual's development where they commence internalizing and adhering to the norms and structures intrinsic to society. In this context, individuals' initial expectations of an effortless pathway to becoming an ASN signify their initial symbolic alignment with the notion that bureaucratic roles might not be inherently intricate or elusive.

The phrase 'but it turns out' contradicts initial expectations and actual results. Then, the phrase 'I wish I could go crazy' indicates that the young bureaucrat found it challenging to become an ASN. Implicitly, this articulates the will to free themselves from the trap of existing norms. The word 'go crazy' shows the willingness from within to escape from the symbolic phase called norms and bureaucratic attributes. This argumentation reaffirms the Žižekian subject's perspective on the individual who can potentially carry out resistance to overthrow the symbolic order and look for alternatives outside the existing bureaucratic order.

While not directly challenging the system, these posts allude to civil servants' frustrations and difficulties. This humor serves as a coping mechanism for the authors and an indirect means to express their sentiments regarding the system. It gives them a channel to convey their discontent while sidestepping potential repercussions.

Fundamentally, the practices associated with the imaginary and symbolic phases are intertwined and operate in conjunction. Rather than unfolding linearly or sequentially, the imaginary and symbolic phases are dialectical and mutually dependent. Both arise from the encounter with the real, which is characterized as traumatic and intolerable for the human subject (Žižek, 2018). The imaginary serves as a mechanism for dealing with the real by constructing a coherent and stable self-image and worldview rooted in narcissistic and idealized identifications. In contrast, the symbolic serves as a means to escape the real by conforming to a system of rules and meanings that transcends and regulates one's desires and actions (Žižek, 2018).

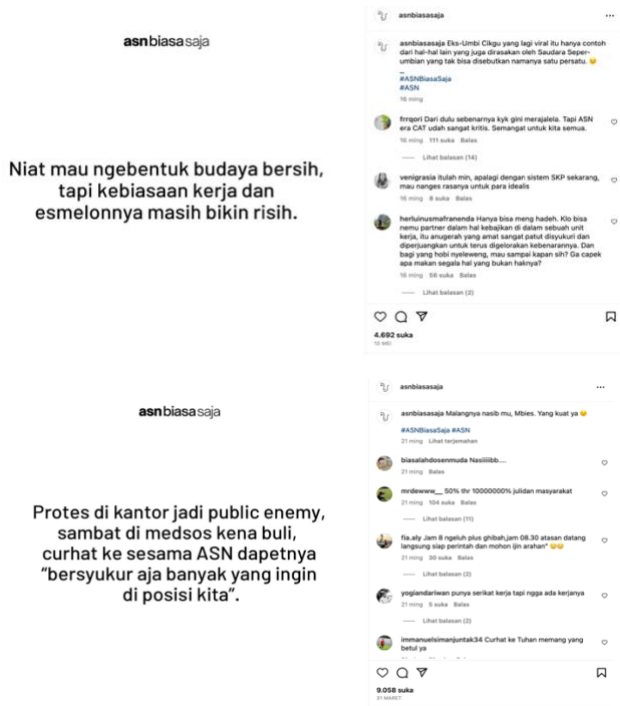
Nevertheless, neither the imaginary nor the symbolic can entirely obscure or eliminate the real, which invariably resurfaces through gaps, contradictions, or antagonisms (Žižek, 2018). Consequently, the imaginary and the symbolic engage in perpetual negotiation and conflict, both with each other and the real. The imaginary may contest or counter the symbolic by asserting individuality or creativity against societal norms or expectations. Conversely, the symbolic can undermine or subvert the imaginary by exposing its illusions or contradictions through language or critique.

In the context of discussing the critique of bureaucracy by young bureaucrats through Žižek's perspective, it can be posited that bureaucracy constitutes a form of symbolic order that imposes a rigid and rational framework on human affairs while simultaneously engendering its manifestations of irrationality and inefficiency (Gajdushek, 2003). The critique of bureaucracy by young bureaucrats can be viewed as an embodiment of its imaginative dimension, which seeks to unveil or challenge the deficiencies or constraints of the bureaucratic system. Nonetheless, it can also be regarded as an outcome of its symbolic dimension, which enables it to articulate its discontent or dissent through language and argument. Consequently, the critique of bureaucracy by young bureaucrats does not emerge from a linear progression from the imaginary to the symbolic; instead, it manifests the dialectical relationship between the two.

The Real Phase

The Real phase represents an enigmatic and disruptive force that eludes complete symbolization (Noys, 2016). It embodies that which defies full representation within the language and structures of society. When subjects aspire to transcend the Symbolic, they engage in a radical act. This distinction sets the Lacanian subject apart from the Zizekian subject, with the latter characterized by the presence of the concept of resistance. Axiologically, the subject's resistance finds expression through action. The subject confronts the inherent impossibility through their actions, compelling them to enter the Real. The subject's actions are not aimed at transforming the coordinates of impossibility into possibility; instead, the significance of the action itself holds paramount importance (Robert, 2010).

Criticism serves as an integral facet of this resistance. However, within the @asnbiasasaja account, some indications suggest the criticism has yet to transcend the Symbolic fully. This becomes evident when examining the following two posts:



Figur 5. @asnbiasasaja's post about protest in bureaucracy

[English: The intention is to establish a clean culture, but the work habits and esmelon (a slang word for eselon) still make me uncomfortable | Protesting in the office becomes a public enemy, complaining on social media gets bullied, confiding in fellow ASNs gets "just be grateful that many want to be in our position".]

Source: @asnbiasasaja

The sentence "the intention is to form a clean culture, but the work habits and esmelon (a slang word for eselon) still make me uncomfortable" can be analyzed from a Žižekian perspective, specifically focusing on the subject in the real phase. In Žižek's framework, the real phase represents the point at which individuals confront the limitations and complexities of the symbolic order and the tangible aspects of their lives (Žižek, 2018).

The phrase "his intention to form a clean culture" reflects the idealized and symbolic aspects of the bureaucratic transformation envisioned by the young bureaucrats. The "intention to form a clean culture" is an idealized image or fantasy, characteristic of the imaginary phase in Žižekian terms. It represents their vision for reforming the bureaucratic system, shaped by their ideals and aspirations. Then, the phrase "but work habits and esmelons are still uncomfortable" transitions into the real phase. The phrase "work habits" refers to the practices and behaviors in the bureaucratic system that contradict the envisioned clean culture. This discomfort signifies a confrontation with the concrete workings of the bureaucratic system and its deviation from the idealized vision.

Unfortunately, the discomfort expressed in the tangible phase indicates that, despite their intentions and criticisms in the symbolic phase, young bureaucrats remain unable to break free from symbolic bureaucracy. The entrenched work habits and practices of the bureaucratic system continue to exert influence, reinforcing the status quo. This is evident in the statement: "Protesting in the office becomes a public enemy, complaining on social media

gets bullied, confiding in fellow ASNs gets "just be grateful that many want to be in our position." Such responses illustrate the significant constraints young bureaucrats face in challenging the system. Dismissive remarks like "just be grateful" reflect the structural resistance to change, where attempts to seek understanding from peers are often met with rejection or complacency.

This dynamic highlights how, despite their efforts in the tangible phase, young bureaucrats remain ensnared within the symbolic order of bureaucracy. The responses they receive underscore the system's capacity to uphold existing norms and resist transformation. This aligns with Bourdieu's (2018) concept of habitus, in which deeply ingrained dispositions and practices unconsciously reinforce the prevailing social order. Within this framework, bureaucratic norms persist not solely through formal structures but through internalized behaviors that sustain the system.

Moreover, the hostility, bullying, or indifference encountered when voicing dissent suggests the presence of a dominant ideological fantasy that discourages criticism of the status quo. These ideological constructs may include beliefs such as "hard work leads to success," "loyalty to superiors ensures rewards," or "gratitude should replace complaints." Such narratives serve to justify and normalize workplace inequalities, positioning dissatisfaction as a personal failure rather than a structural issue. This dynamic reflects Foucault's (2023) notion of disciplinary power, where institutions not only regulate external behaviors but also shape internal thought processes, ensuring compliance even in the face of systemic injustices.

From the perspective of the Žižekian subject in the real phase, these fantasies are not only erroneous but also perilous, as they obstruct the subject from confronting the authentic reality – the fact that they are subjected to exploitation, alienation, and oppression within a system that shows little concern for their well-being or happiness. The real phase represents the stage of subjectivity wherein individuals realize that there is no Big Other, no supreme authority or guarantee capable of imbuing their existence with meaning or purpose. The Great Other is an alternative term for the symbolic order, a concept that Žižek frequently equates with God, ideology, or society (Johnston, 2004). Subjects in the real phase must confront reality's profound contingency and inconsistency without resorting to any fantasy or illusion to fill the gap left by the Real.

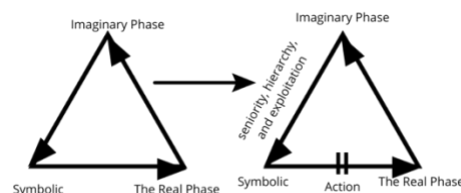


Figure 5. Žižekian Subject Process in Bureaucratic Transformation

Source: Processed by Researchers (2024)

The figure above illustrates the formation and transformation of subjects through their interactions with the Symbolic and the Real, encapsulating Žižek's framework for subject transformation within a bureaucratic environment. It depicts how an individual's understanding and engagement with the system evolve through encounters with the Real, leading to a heightened critical awareness of power dynamics such as seniority, hierarchy, and exploitation. However, in the context of

@asnbiasasaja's post, this process has yet to progress to the stage of concrete action.

From a Žižekian perspective, the subject resists the passive acceptance of ideological structures and actively seeks to deconstruct ideological illusions through ethical action. This aligns with Žižek's assertion that genuine emancipation necessitates the suspension of the symbolic order and its normative constraints (Žižek, 2000). Unlike moral action, which operates within a predetermined ethical framework, ethical action is inherently radical, challenging and redefining prevailing notions of justice and injustice. Such action entails significant risk, as it must not only confront ideological fallacies but also navigate the personal relationships that sustain them.

Žižek's viewpoint on ethical action emphasizes the imperative of tangible involvement beyond mere discussion. Although assertive statements of dissatisfaction, exemplified by @asnbiasasaja, may convey bureaucratic frustration, they remain limited to the symbolic framework. The lack of concrete action indicates that ideological frameworks remain uncontested, as digital activism does not provide the radical intervention necessary to change existing power dynamics. While social media facilitates discourse, Žižekian ethics asserts that authentic transformation necessitates activity beyond digital realms.

Implications for Bureaucratic Reform

This study advances the literature on bureaucratic reform and street-level bureaucracy in three important ways. First, it introduces generational dynamics as a critical analytical dimension in understanding bureaucratic agency. While existing scholarship has extensively examined discretion, coping strategies, and frontline implementation (Lipsky, 2010), limited attention has been given to how generational positioning and digital socialization shape bureaucratic subjectivity. By focusing on young bureaucrats and their online interactions, this study demonstrates how generational identity can function as a governance variable that influences how bureaucrats interpret hierarchical authority, workplace dynamics, and reform narratives.

Second, the study expands the scope of bureaucratic analysis beyond formal organizational settings by examining social media as an emerging arena of bureaucratic discourse (Marienfeldt, 2024). Digital platforms enable bureaucrats to articulate shared frustrations, experiences, and critiques outside official institutional channels, thereby revealing how bureaucratic politics and professional identities are negotiated within informal digital communities.

Third, by applying the theoretical perspective of Slavoj Žižek, this research introduces a critical-ideological lens to the study of bureaucracy. While conventional public administration theories primarily emphasize institutional incentives and organizational behavior, indicators of organizational strain, policy overload, and implementation gaps (Chang & Brewer, 2023), a Žižekian perspective highlights how bureaucratic authority is reproduced through symbolic structures, ideological narratives, and shared fantasies about professionalism and order. This approach reveals how humor and satire among young bureaucrats simultaneously expose contradictions within bureaucratic systems while remaining embedded within the symbolic order that sustains them. Beyond its theoretical contributions, the study also offers practical implications for public sector governance. Humor-based critiques circulating on social media should not be dismissed as mere entertainment but understood as informal

signals of organizational tensions and structural challenges within bureaucratic institutions. Recurring themes such as hierarchical blame-shifting, communication gaps, and workplace pressures indicate areas where institutional reforms may be required. Public sector organizations could therefore benefit from establishing safe internal feedback mechanisms, strengthening collaborative leadership practices, and paying closer attention to digital spaces where bureaucrats articulate their everyday experiences. Recognizing these expressions as sources of organizational insight may contribute to more responsive and inclusive bureaucratic reform processes.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that young bureaucrats are not merely passive actors within bureaucratic institutions but engage in subtle forms of critique through humor and satire. Digital expressions shared through platforms such as @asnbiasasaja illustrate how everyday bureaucratic frustrations—particularly those related to hierarchical authority, blame-shifting, and workplace pressures—are articulated in ways that resonate with broader communities of civil servants. Rather than forming a unified collective identity, young bureaucrats navigate between shared experiences and institutional constraints, simultaneously identifying with bureaucratic norms while questioning their contradictions.

By applying the theoretical perspective of Slavoj Žižek, this study reveals layers of bureaucratic critique that are often overlooked in conventional public administration research. While traditional organizational theories tend to focus on institutional incentives, formal hierarchies, or administrative behavior, a Žižekian framework highlights the ideological and symbolic dimensions through which bureaucratic authority is reproduced and contested. From this perspective, humor functions as a form of symbolic resistance that exposes contradictions between reform narratives and everyday bureaucratic realities. However, this resistance largely remains within the symbolic order rather than translating into direct institutional transformation.

A key limitation of this study is that it does not capture instances in which symbolic critique develops into forms of ethical or collective action capable of challenging bureaucratic structures more directly. The findings suggest that although young bureaucrats recognize contradictions within the system, their expressions of dissatisfaction remain largely confined to discursive spaces such as social media.

Future research could therefore explore the conditions under which symbolic critique evolves into more substantive forms of engagement within bureaucratic institutions. Longitudinal studies examining the trajectories of digital bureaucratic communities may provide insights into whether expressions of humor and satire eventually translate into offline activism, organizational reforms, or new forms of collective action among public servants. Such research would contribute to a deeper understanding of how emerging digital cultures within bureaucracies may shape the future dynamics of bureaucratic reform and institutional change.

Ultimately, this study reconceptualizes bureaucratic critique not as an external challenge to the state, but as an ideological negotiation emerging from within the symbolic order of bureaucracy itself.

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CrediT authorship contribution statement

Dodi Faedlulloh: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, writing—original draft, supervision.
Vina Karmilasari: Data curation, methodology, resources.
M. Irsyad Fadoli: Formal analysis, resources, writing—review and editing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Ethical Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for research involving human participants and was approved by the Ethics Committee of Universitas Lampung. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

Data Availability

The data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declaration of Generative AI Use

The authors used Quillbot to assist with language editing and to improve grammar, clarity, readability, and the overall presentation of the manuscript. All AI-generated outputs were carefully reviewed and revised by the authors. The authors bear full responsibility for the scientific content, originality, accuracy, and integrity of this article.

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