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The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices Vincent Dubois. Jean-Yves Bart, trans. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010. 203 pp.
[republished in English]

This intriguing book, first published in French in 1999, is an excellent translation of the work of a highly regarded political sociologist. Based on field research conducted over a six-month period in 1995 in the Family Benefit offices (*Caisses d'Allocations Familiales*) located in two pseudonymous French provincial cities, it draws mainly on extensive observation of the face-to-face encounters between clients coming into these offices and the civil servants responsible for receiving them. Dubois's data also include substantial material from formal and informal interviews with the latter, and some interviews with clients in the office waiting rooms. His analysis of this data effectively combines interactionism informed by the work of Erving Goffman with Bourdieu-style structural analysis of institutions and of the dynamics of social reproduction they contain or foster. The result is a lively, thought-provoking account of bureaucratic encounters and welfare policy implementation. Cogently combining specific examples from observational or interview materials with broader generalizations and (lightly) theoretical elaborations, this study offers a steady flow of frequently counterintuitive and consistently compelling insights that are undoubtedly applicable to a wide range of bureaucratic encounters or poverty-management efforts.

The timing of Dubois's field research is significant. French Family Benefit offices were long charged primarily with administering the state-funded family allowances that are intended to encourage high birth rates and are distributed to all parents as a function of the number and ages of their children (regardless of household income). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, the relative significance of this type of funding diminished dramatically under a plethora of new means-tested welfare programs intended to address some of the difficulties of families or individuals living in poverty. As a result, Family Benefit bureaucrats experienced a rapid, radical alteration in the explicit purposes of their work and in the contours of their target clientele: long used to dealing with a cross-section of the general public, they were quite suddenly charged mainly with administering welfare benefits to persons classified as impoverished. By the time Dubois began his field research, this transformation was well established but the implicated civil servants were still adjusting to it and remained self-conscious about shifts in the aims and subjects of their work. Because this new situation had not yet been fully internalized by those on the front lines of implementation, his data offer especially telling insights into processes of change within a bureaucratic setting.

One of Dubois's main purposes in this study is to challenge familiar assumptions about the administrative encounter as simply involving an impersonal bureaucrat facing a standard client. Instead, he argues, on the one hand, that civil servants—at least those who deal directly with the public—operate simultaneously (or alternately) as depersonalized agents of the state and as individual social agents. Their formal role is uncertain enough to leave room for individual differences of style in how to play it: depending on circumstance and personality, a bureaucrat might treat an encounter with formal disinvestment or personalized compassion, variously shoring up his position by merging with the institution or distinguishing himself

from it. On the other hand, Dubois argues that clients cannot usefully be understood as pawns who are routinely dominated or systematically resistant in any straightforward way. Rather, he sees them as creative actors who are often adroit at manipulating the encounter by appropriating bureaucratic categories, personalizing the interaction, or otherwise undermining, mitigating, or adjusting the relatively more powerful position of the bureaucrat across the desk.

For Dubois, the administrative encounter offers an especially reified form of confrontation between “individual” and “society” as a practical experience. The bureaucratic roles prescribed on both sides of the desk function, he effectively shows, partly to create and maintain social order. But at the same time, the interaction of persons playing (more or less) these roles is one key location where institutional incoherencies are especially likely to be revealed and denounced, flaws in the established order claimed and managed. The inherent fragility and mutability of the kinds of bureaucratic roles treated here, then, provide a significant mechanism for the adaptation of administrative practice and the evolution of institutions. Dubois thus aims to shift focus from decision-centered understandings of public policy and its transformations, demonstrating instead how routine interactions help to shape changes in the ways such policies are actually implemented and experienced.

Although this perspective will hardly surprise many anthropologists, Dubois establishes it by an unusually compelling and thought-provoking route. This study will be of particular interest to students and scholars of bureaucracies and bureaucrats, welfare policy, and state management of social issues. It also provides an engaging illustration of the impact of Erving Goffman's popularity among French social scientists in the 1990s, specifically of the Gallic versions of symbolic interactionism resulting from that encounter.