

BOOK FORUM

STREET-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY IN FRANCE

A Discussion of Vincent Dubois's *The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices*, trans. Jean-Yves Bart (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010)

Welfare As It Is

Frédéric Viguié
New York University

After the Second World War, France created a welfare system that promoted social insurance based on occupations and relegated assistance schemes to a subsidiary role only meant to help people considered legitimately incapable of working. In what some called a new “insurance society,” social benefits were received in recognition of rights drawn from former contributions, not according to the assessment of the individual characteristics of those in need. But the rise in long-term unemployment during the 1980s dramatically increased the number of people with no rights to social insurance. In December 1988, the French Parliament created a new scheme for people with no or low income: the *revenu minimum d’insertion* (RMI). It was not insurance and thus did not require previous contributions; rather, it was means-tested. The RMI guaranteed all adults over age 25 a minimum income as long as they would commit to a “projet d’insertion”: “actively” looking for a job and participating in professional training or in social work programs. Whereas RMI creators estimated the scheme would not reach more than 400,000 beneficiaries, by 1995 almost one million people received the RMI, and almost 1.2 million by 1999. These numbers remind us not just of the magnitude of poverty in contemporary France, but also of the large number of people whose insufficient income has come to depend on an assessment of their individual needs and a willingness to assume personal responsibility.

Vincent Dubois’s book, *The Poor and the Bureaucrat*, first published in 1999, renewed the field of public policy studies in France by focusing on bureaucratic encounters between the welfare state and the public. French social scientists



had researched changes in the work and living conditions of the working class. But their approach to social policies remained normative, more political than sociological. The best example is Pierre Rosanvallon's *The New Social Question: Rethinking the Welfare State* (1995). Rosanvallon criticized the philosophy of the French welfare system and its reliance on social insurance, which he saw as unable to respond to inexorable economic and social changes. He recommended a new welfare model based on citizenship, and pleaded that France should create a "society of insertion" that would "activate" what he called the "passive" social expenditures distributed to the most disadvantaged. By contrast, Dubois's ethnographic fieldwork, carried out in 1995, shifted the focus from what public policies were or ought to be to what they did at the level where they encountered the public. Looking back, the book represents one of those clarifying moments when we realize that debates about policy are not as important as understanding the changes that have already taken place.

Dubois carried out his ethnographic survey by looking at two family welfare offices in average-sized provincial cities. Family welfare offices do not determine eligibility for allowances. They determine and update the amount of allowances, thereby playing a crucial role in the lives of welfare clients, who come to the office to inquire about delays, sudden decreases in the amount of allowances, or eligibility for new benefits. Primarily using direct observation, Dubois explored face-to-face encounters between front-desk welfare workers and their clients. *The Bureaucrat and the Poor* borrowed concepts developed by American sociologists (Erving Goffman, Everett Hughes, and Michael Lipsky) to offer a fine-grained ethnographic description, but expanded upon them by using Pierre Bourdieu's general concept of dynamic relationships between the micro and the macro, to give fresh insight into how a central policy decision translated into the daily life of the most disadvantaged.¹ The second book by a then very young sociologist and political scientist, *The Bureaucrat and the Poor* immediately inspired many young French scholars to bring together in their questions both structural relationships and daily interactions between the state and the people (see, for example, Alexis Spire's research on immigration and fiscal administrations).²

Dubois's analysis of the implementation of the RMI broke new ground by revealing a much more nuanced and ambiguous reality than had been perceived by scholars of the French welfare state. *The Poor and the Bureaucrat* did confirm some of the positive preconceptions of the RMI: in addition to providing an indispensable financial resource to their clients, family welfare offices also offered a place where isolated and distressed people could talk about their problems, and be listened to. But in Dubois's account, the welfare offices also reinforced experiences of economic and social domination among the poor. RMI recipients were obliged to reveal the most intimate aspects of their lives, while their financial resources and family structures were constantly under surveillance.

Dubois also showed that there were many dysfunctional elements to the new institutional order: mail was not always sent correctly, administrative codifications often did not fit with real life, and payments were frequently delayed.

A sense of injustice also stemmed from obvious contradictions between the purported goals of the RMI and its means: it sought to foster the autonomy of beneficiaries, yet benefits were often cut when people found temporary, part-time employment. RMI clients were also expected to show that they took responsibility, but mass unemployment made it almost impossible to meet the state's expectation. Some clients over-personalized their relationship with front-desk welfare workers, while others resisted the call to be personal by giving laconic responses or by voicing their resentment to so much paperwork.

Dubois surprised French readers by exposing the decisive role played by low-level state agents in the implementation of public policies. The discretionary power they had did not fit squarely with the Weberian model of bureaucratic action that many French social scientists took for granted. Welfare workers, Dubois shows, certainly acted in part as bureaucrats. But administrative hierarchy did not clarify expectations regarding front-desk work. Dubois conducted his research in 1995, only six years after family welfare officers had begun implementing the RMI and dealing with France's disadvantaged population. Without clear bureaucratic rules, state agents often found themselves straddling the bureaucratic and the personal. Their individual backgrounds and experiences shaped their encounters with and their decisions about their clients. Practices therefore varied significantly from one welfare office to another, and from one agent to the next. While some welfare agents prioritized administrative expediency, others spent a great deal of time trying to understand the individual circumstances of their clients.

Now, almost twenty years after Dubois conducted his initial survey, we can see that *The Bureaucrat and the Poor* revealed to its readers an emerging "active welfare state" that had left a central question partially unresolved: would it promote autonomy or surveillance of the poor? Since Dubois's pioneering work, a new generation of French social scientists have followed in his footsteps and looked at the concrete implementation of public policies. Their cumulative work (including Dubois's own new research) shows that what was once an unresolved question has been resolved for the time being. Politics and policies have promoted the reinforcement of surveillance, and the role of low-level welfare agents has been clarified: they are expected to monitor their clients more strictly. But while they can now use repressive administrative tools that did not exist in the mid-1990s, their decisions on poor people's individual responsibilities remain largely based on their subjective perceptions.

Notes

1. In particular, Dubois used Erving Goffman's analysis of service relationships developed in *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1961). He borrowed from Everett Hughes's notion of roles created by institutions presented in "Institutional Office and the Person," *American Journal of Sociology* 43, 3 (1937). Michael Lipsky's insistence on the policy-

- making role of street-level bureaucrats is a crucial influence: *Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1980).
2. Alexis Spire, *Étrangers à la carte: L'administration de l'immigration en France (1945–1975)* (Paris: Grasset, 2005). Alexis Spire, *Faibles et puissants face à l'impôt* (Paris: Raisons d'agir, 2012).

French Welfare Workers as Street-level Bureaucrats

Michael Lipsky

Distinguished Senior Fellow, Demos

A paradox of public services whose members interact with citizens is that the work should ultimately be boring, but it isn't. It should be boring because interactions with citizens are limited in scope and governed by a restricted set of rules. It isn't boring because people are endlessly interesting, each presenting himself or herself as a unique personality with a special life history. The interactions themselves, while sometimes repetitive, provide opportunities for human interaction, unlike many occupations dominated by manipulating words, numbers, symbols, and machines.

One is reminded that public service can be nurturing in this way if one has had the privilege of working in or observing such public service workers over time, or by reading persuasive accounts of their experiences. Such an account is offered by Vincent Dubois in *The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices*. Published originally in French in 1996, this English translation includes an introduction by the author specifically written for an international audience, and is accompanied by an insightful introduction by Stephen Maynard-Moody.

The Bureaucrat and the Poor is a compelling, fine-grained study of the ways in which front-line workers in two French income security offices produce welfare policy as they interact with citizens over the full range of welfare-type benefits available to them. The power of the French welfare workers, according to Dubois, rests not so much in their role as gatekeepers to the world of benefits as in their reproduction of the social order. Workers teach clients how to be clients, but also demonstrate flexibility toward claimants, presenting the face of the state as sometimes responsive and sometimes inflexible. Reproduction of the social order is a complex affair in which the state is represented as rule-bound but also capable of sympathy.

Workers and welfare claimants are keenly and individually observed. Analysts of front-line worker behavior will relish the detail and depth with which encounters with citizens are recorded. While the author suggests categories of workers' reactions to the ways claimants present themselves, he is conservative in generalizing about frontline workers' behaviors.

Here is the anthropologist, in the new introduction, sketching the scene, avoiding generalizing beyond the observable: “social backgrounds, personal biographies and careers ... lead social agents to diverse behaviours, including the way they speak ... , the stories they tell ... , and the roles they play....” (xvi) This reviewer is very comfortable with the author’s decision to offer only the most modest classificatory schemes.

During the field work for the study the French welfare state was just beginning to accommodate the new North African population that was comprising a greater proportion of welfare claimants. The encounters of welfare workers with “new” citizens will seem very familiar to observers of the American scene. In this respect the book can be read in part as an account of how public services accommodate the challenges posed when the personal styles and cultural norms of clients change.

The book offers a convincing discussion of the ways in which French welfare workers comprehend their clients, draw on that comprehension to structure their interactions with them, and take advantage of authorized and unauthorized mechanisms for responding to claimants within the allowable boundaries of welfare administration. The author shows how various workers structure their understanding of what welfare administration is, and how their shortcuts in practice, and abstractions for understanding the way claimants present themselves, combine to create the policy to be delivered.

These are the essential tasks in analyzing street-level bureaucracy, as I understand the concept, and they are executed superbly by Professor Dubois.

Dubois takes little interest in how to make the system work better. He offers no advice on how to bend workers’ behavior toward management’s preferred outcomes, or, in an era of increased focus on managerial reforms, on how to protect workers’ discretion. While the study was conducted during the time when elements of performance management were first being introduced into the French welfare system, apparently those reforms were not powerful enough to attract the author’s attention as a major element of the study.

Refreshingly, too, the author is not particularly interested in whether workers’ behaviors can and should be sorted into general patterns of practice. He does guide the reader by directing attention to categories of observation that provide subheads for individual chapters, for example, workers’ personal dispositions, or their attitudes toward their jobs (92). He stops short of suggesting that workers display systematic responses to clients in managing their work loads.

Beyond the world of scholarship in public administration, there are practitioners who appreciate works such as this one because they recognize themselves in the work, and recognize that they have been seen. Works such as this one validate practitioners’ work, as practitioners understand that they are not alone in experiencing the tensions of their jobs. Practitioners are heartened by the realization that outside observers recognize the dilemmas they experience, and appreciate the solutions they arrive at, even if those solutions are not fully

authorized in the workplace. For these results to be realized the rendition must be artful, as Dubois' account surely is.

As to the reform agenda, in these imperfect public service systems—buffeted by pressures to reduce costs and narrow discretion in the name of improved policy implementation—the production of constructive social orders in policing, classroom teaching, social work and other front-line practices may depend upon the grounding in reality that convincing accounts such as this one provides.

A Reply to Michael Lipsky and Frédéric Viguière's Comments

Vincent Dubois

University of Strasbourg, SAGE

Herrick Chapman and the editorial board of *French Politics, Culture & Society* were kind enough to do me the honor of organizing this forum on my book *The Bureaucrat and the Poor*, which brings insights from Michael Lipsky, whose seminal *Street-Level Bureaucracy* has been highly influential on my own work, and Frédéric Viguière, who has deep knowledge of the social and political history of French social welfare. I want, first of all, to warmly thank them for providing this opportunity for debate. While it is beyond the scope of this reply to address all of the many questions raised by my two colleagues, I will use this space to shed light on aspects of the book that may have remained unclear or implicit, and to provide some complementary comments.

Considering that we are in 2013, it might seem surprising to discuss a book that, though translated into English in 2010, was first published in French a decade earlier based on fieldwork conducted in the mid-1990s. This satisfies me as an author: though so much time has passed since my research and the French welfare system has seen many transformations, my findings do not appear to be obsolete yet. In the preface to the English edition, I gave a brief account of some of these changes, such as the impact of the economic crisis on welfare clients' needs and attitudes, the development of electronic administration, the shift toward workfare-oriented programs, and the increasing concern of politicians and bureaucrats about alleged welfare fraud and abuse. There is, however, more than updating the data collected. My method consisted in carefully examining the macro socio-historical settings of the interactions between welfare clerks and their clients, and I argue that these trends were already underway when I was observing these encounters. I also argue that the study of bureaucratic interactions has remained a relevant tool to account for overarching transformations such as the individualization of welfare, the responsabilization of the poor, the bureaucratization of social work, and the increased discretionary powers enjoyed by street-level bureau-

crats. The mid-1990s can retrospectively be viewed as a crucial juncture in this shift from the so-called classical welfare to the post-welfare era in France. As a result, my emphasis on the fact that each observation I made and each hypothesis I proposed were associated with a specific time and place paradoxically makes my findings easier to transpose to a different setting, and goes some way toward explaining their relevance several years later.

Those familiar with the recent history of the American welfare system will probably draw a parallel between my account of the French situation in the mid-1990s and US welfare reform during the same period. Many of my insights indeed echo the prolific literature on the implementation of the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, which replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children after the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996. This policy change raised the issue of the implementation of this reform, in terms of differences from one state to another, and in terms of discrepancies between the content of the reform and actual front-line practices. Some scholars have studied face-to-face interactions between welfare workers and their clients in order to explain “the slippage that can occur between a policy goal articulated at the top and its realization at the bottom.”¹ Despite obvious common points between policy orientations on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and a shared use of the “street-level bureaucracy” framework, my perspective was quite different. Instead of one single major reform, France has seen a wide range of transformations in terms of welfare policy, management style, and socio-economic conditions. Therefore, my task in the field did not consist in recording the impact of a given policy decision, but rather in providing a synthetic and consistent account of varied and sometimes unidentified changes. I approached the front lines of the welfare system as a stage where these transformations became visible. As I tried to make sense of the individual drama that unfolded on the stage, unity of time, place, and action became a methodological tool, which I used to grasp macro transformations that would have been more difficult to evidence by other means.²

Michael Lipsky pertinently remarks that, among the numerous ongoing processes, I did not pay much attention to the introduction of managerial reforms into the French welfare system. There were two main reasons for this. The first one pertains to my positioning as a researcher. At the time of my research, relationships between bureaucrats and citizens were mainly viewed in terms of “service quality” and within the scope of programs aiming at “the modernization of public services.” My work had been commissioned by a national welfare organization, and I did not want it to be used as a sophisticated version of the recommendations made by public relations or ergonomics experts appointed to design “modernization” programs. My goal was to describe bureaucratic encounters as they are, not to define how they should be. In the end, I do think that my critical approach was more useful to policy debate than any direct recommendation I could have made. The second reason

why I decided not to underline managerial reforms is that my research focused on the social uses and functions of face-to-face interactions in welfare organizations, and did not aim at providing a general view of welfare bureaucracy. If I willingly set aside the managerial aspects, it is because my observations convinced me that organizational reforms, mainly consisting in the training of agents for “a better reception of clients” and in client satisfaction surveys, carried little weight in actual face-to-face relationships, in contrast to sociological factors such as poor linguistic skills, long-term unemployment, unstable family life or precarious housing on the clients’ side, quantitative pressure, poor working conditions and role-related dilemmas on the agents’ side.

Accounting for these sociological factors in the analysis of bureaucratic encounters and practices, as well as putting this interactional level in a macro-social perspective, was a way, as Frédéric Viguier suggests, to highlight what I call the double face of bureaucratic power. At the level of individual clients, this can be understood in terms of submission versus resistance. Are the poor passive individuals, forced to comply with the injunctions of welfare agencies they depend on, unable to find their way in the complex web of rules and institutions of contemporary welfare? Or on the contrary, do they have their own strategies to maximize their interest, as standard economic language puts it, or at least “tactics” to accommodate domination? To avoid the simplifications inherent to unilateral theoretical statements, I turned the tension between these two views into empirical research questions, and addressed them in light of my material. The questions became the following: How can we measure the level of submission to welfare administration? What factors are involved in the variations of this level? Under which conditions is it possible to resist bureaucracy, to cope with its demands or to escape its rules? Beyond an empirical account of what happens during bureaucratic encounters, but far from the oversimplification of binary oppositions, *The Bureaucrat and the Poor* proposes answers to these questions. I followed the same approach in my examination of the functions of welfare bureaucracy, which can both promote autonomy and exert coercion, provide comfort and be a source of humiliation and despair. In general terms, I would say that, as Durkheim explained about socialization processes, the positive and the constraining side of it are always there. Therefore, I consider it important to ask under which conditions, toward whom, and to what extent welfare bureaucracy is a source of constraint or a source of autonomy. In light of contemporary trends, I argue that as welfare recipients are increasingly viewed with suspicion, subject to surveillance and sometimes the target of coercive measures, the dark side of welfare bureaucracy power is gaining ground, as my current research on welfare control and anti-fraud policies largely confirms. In this sense, my next book will be a follow-up of *The Bureaucrat and the Poor*.

Notes

1. Irene Lurie, *At the Front Lines of the Welfare System: A Perspective on the Decline in Welfare Caseloads* (Albany: The Rockefeller Institute Press, 2006), 3.
2. This method is what I have suggested calling "critical policy ethnography." See my paper "Towards a Critical Policy Ethnography. Lessons from Fieldwork on Welfare Control in France," *Critical Policy Studies* 3, 2 (2009): 219–37.