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The Two Bodies of the Bureaucrat

Book Review

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Vincent Dubois, The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices *(Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010). 228 pp. $99.95 (cloth), ISBN: 9781409402893.*

The Bureaucrat and the Poor is an ethnographic study of bureaucratic encounters at two French welfare offices. Drawing on six months of participant observation and extensive interviews, Vincent Dubois describes meticulously the everyday interactions that take place, across the reception desk, between frontline bureaucrats and the clients they are meant to serve. The result is a fascinating and theoretically incisive "bottom-up" study of public administration that sheds light on how institutional roles and identities come to be shaped and transformed.

The book has garnered considerable attention in France ever since its publication under the title *La Vie au Guichet* (Dubois 1999), and I believe that its translation will prove equally valuable to English-language scholarship on street-level bureaucracy and policy implementation. The translated volume comes with a foreword by Steven Maynard-Moody and a new introduction by the author that provides helpful background on the specific welfare institutions that are studied—the Caisses d'Allocations Familiales.

Dubois seeks to challenge a common conception of the bureaucratic encounter as a quasi-mechanical interaction between two parties who lack individuating features—the impersonal and distant bureaucrat, on the one hand, and the standard client who can be routinely processed, on the other. To the extent that such "anonymous" roles are adopted, they are, he argues, the result of strategic adaptation by the two parties to the context and constraints of their encounter. As Dubois puts it, "neither impersonal bureaucrats nor standardized clients exist: only social agents with individual personalities who, within certain conditions and limits, are required to play the role of the impersonal or standardized bureaucrat or client" (3). "Impersonality" and "standardness" are best understood as resources that bureaucrats and clients mobilize to control how the bureaucratic encounter unfolds. Bureaucrats resort to impersonality, for instance, to reestablish the balance of authority in the face of an abusive or haughty client, to preempt lengthy digressions into a client's personal life, or to deliver faster service.

Behind the impersonal bureaucrat and the standard client, however, there are individuals whose particularities pierce through the expressionless masks. The bureaucrats who choose to leave the comfort and repetitiveness of the back office in order to become reception agents often do so to increase their sense of personal responsibility (88). They come to value their contact with clients, they become sensitive to their plight, and the job gives them a sense of purpose (88). Even those who do not see the job as a vocation cannot help but be moved by the harrowing stories they listen to on a daily basis: they are, so to speak, "pulled out" of their bureaucratic torpor by their interactions with clients. The reception agents, then, often become personally involved *as individuals* in the interaction. The same is all the more true for clients, who typically come to welfare offices in a state of pressing personal need and precariousness.

Dubois, who looks at the bureaucratic encounter primarily from the standpoint of reception agents, shows that their job involves constantly negotiating such competing impulses—toward personal involvement, on the one hand, and impersonal withdrawal, on the other. This requires them to perform a complex balancing act, a kind of acrobatics of the self, through which they move back and forth between being compassionate individuals, detached from the institution that they represent, and being impersonal bureaucrats who morph into the institution and refrain from putting their private identities on the line.

Dubois makes a highly perceptive allusion, in this regard, to the classic study by Ernst Kantorowicz (1997) on the two bodies of the sovereign. Much

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like the king, who is at once a natural person and the embodiment of the body politic, the reception agent is both an individual with a particular life trajectory and socioeconomic status, and the personification of a bureaucratic apparatus that is meant to be impersonal and at equal distance from all (73).

The separation between these two "bodies"—the person and the bureaucrat—is both a resource that the reception agent can mobilize so as to keep the interaction "under control" and a pressure valve that he or she can adjust to maintain a sense of psychological balance (117). The switching of identities is also rendered necessary by the fact that reception agents, like most other street-level bureaucrats, inherit normative imperatives that often are conflicting and that must constantly be traded off against one another. To be a "good" bureaucrat is to be compassionate and sympathetic, but it is also to be efficient and impartial (135). Dubois shows us that reception agents find different ways of making peace with these often-conflicting imperatives and that they develop, accordingly, not just different working styles but also distinct moral personalities.

Dubois's study is captivating in this regard because it uncovers the extent to which the services delivered by the supposedly impersonal apparatus of the state are dependent on the moral personalities of individual state agents. As in most studies of street-level bureaucracy, this raises both the encouraging prospect of a personalization of state services and the potential threat of arbitrariness. The book provides a wealth of material for scholars and practitioners who are interested in questions of responsibility and ethics in organizations. It serves as an excellent companion to the first-person stories of street-level bureaucrats collected in *Cops, Teachers, Counselors* (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).

The Bureaucrat and the Poor is remarkably successful at bringing various social scientific perspectives to bear on the bureaucratic encounter. The book is heavily indebted to the work of political scientist Michael Lipsky and sociologists Erving Goffman and Pierre Bourdieu. The merit of Dubois is to show how the strands of analysis inherited from these authors fit together at the micro level and how they can, jointly, reveal what is at stake in the encounter.

As far as I can see, there are four moments in the analysis. Even though they remain intertwined throughout the book, it is helpful to pull them apart and consider them in turn. From Lipsky, Dubois draws an appreciation for the gap that exists between the formal description of the function of street-level bureaucrats and what such bureaucrats actually have to do on a day-to-day basis (Lipsky 2010). The routine of welfare reception agents is infinitely more complex than it looks on paper because it is marred by vague and often conflicting directives and plagued with uncertainty (77). Dubois shows that these agents have, accordingly, a significant amount of leeway (de facto, if not de jure) in shaping their own working practices and their own conception of their role. The first moment of the analysis, then, consists in showing that reception agents do not seamlessly slip into a working personality by virtue of their job description, but that such a working personality results from an adaptive response to the needs of the job.

Dubois then turns to Goffman, as Lipsky did before him, in order to understand which factors determine how bureaucrats come to shape their working personalities. Goffman's emphasis on face-to-face interactions comes in handy because it takes the most salient organizational feature of the work of reception agents—that they are constantly in contact with clients—and shows that it can shed light, in part, on the practices and role conceptions that they develop. Bureaucratic impersonality can be understood, for instance, as an adaptive response to a job that requires frequent interactions with clients under the constraint of severely limited resources (funds, time, emotional availability, etc.). The second moment of the analysis consists in showing that the organizational position that reception agents occupy, and, by extension, the kind of interactions that they have to undertake on a daily basis, can help explain the working practices and role conceptions that they develop. This terrain, of course, already has been canvased by the literature on street-level bureaucracy, but the level of texture and attention that Dubois brings—to the tone, gaze, demeanor, bodily posture, cadence, word choice, and outward appearance of the participants, as well as to the architectural space of their encounter—is, to my knowledge, unsurpassed. It is in such passages, unfortunately, that the translation would have gained from being less literal, and more apt to convey the literary qualities of the original French text.

The third moment of the analysis takes us beyond the immediate institutional and organizational context of the interactions, to probe to extent to which such interactions are shaped by the broader social and normative environment in which they occur. This is where the influence of Bourdieu becomes more pronounced, and where Dubois sees himself, rightly, as making a significant theoretical contribution to current English-language scholarship on street-level bureaucracy. It is necessary, he claims, to examine how factors external to the bureaucratic encounter—most notably, the respective life trajectories and social positions of the two parties across class, race, and gender—weigh in on the encounter, both directly and indirectly (i.e., by shaping the role conception that agents have [92]). Dubois does this by shadowing the work of several reception agents and by showing how their social backgrounds, personal biographies, and career prospects come into play, in subtle but systematic ways, as they interact

with various types of clients. The findings remain suggestive, of course, but they open up new avenues for further and more systematic research.

The fourth, and last, moment of the analysis brings us full circle—it ties the overall social context in which interactions take place to the working practices and role conceptions of reception agents. If we understand (1) that what institutions do is shaped by the working practices and role conceptions of the agents they employ (first moment), (2) that these working practices and role conceptions are shaped both by the organizational position of the agents, which calls for continuous interaction with clients (second moment), and (3) by the respective social positions that agents and clients occupy (third moment), then the last step consists in showing (4) that these social positions are, in part, influenced by the working practices and role conceptions of institutional agents—that is, by what institutions *do* (fourth moment). The goal is to show, in other words, that the bureaucratic encounter not only is influenced by the social context, but also plays a role in shaping this context—the influence goes both ways. Given the asymmetry of power between reception agents and their underprivileged clients (48), "applying an administrative category thus becomes assigning a status; and inculcating the administrative relationship amounts to (re)inculcating the norms of social life" (60–61).

But Dubois also sounds a word of caution: we should be wary to infer, from the largely compliant behavior of the clients, the conclusion that the bureaucratic encounter has succeeded in making them internalize the normative order pressed forth by the state and its representatives. He reminds us, in the spirit of James Scott (1990) and other scholars of "subaltern groups," that what looks like hegemony (an internalization of the norms of the dominant group) is often a form of strategic docility. The clients are not passive. Dubois shows, in fact, that they sometimes can manage to change an institution "from below" by the use that they make of it (177).

While most studies of street-level bureaucracy focus on one or two of the moments mentioned earlier (usually 1 and 2, and sometimes 4), Dubois—by virtue of his ethnographic approach and his focus on a single type of institution—is able to bring all of them together. What *The Bureaucrat and the Poor* loses in terms of breadth, it gains in comprehensiveness and thoroughness. It is a great example of what ethnographic research can bring to the study of public administration and how it can yield insights that transcend the specific context of inquiry. As such, the book will provide precious material for scholars who are engaged in a comparative study of welfare administration across countries. It also will be highly rewarding for readers who are interested, more broadly, in the intricacies of street-level work and in how institutions are produced and transformed by the everyday practices of those who inhabit them.

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