

Lower Classes and Public Institutions

A research program

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Abstract

European societies and many others all around the world have been experiencing major socio-economic challenges for the last four decades. Rises in unemployment and poverty rates have reinforced social needs and problems and defined new ones in many areas, from education to housing and from health to crime. In the meantime, public services and policies addressing these issues have been extensively reformed and sometimes subjected to cuts, impacting their responses to an ever-increasing and diversifying social demand. This research questions the intersection of these two trends and its social effects by examining the concrete interactions between individuals and institutions. It focuses on the relationship to public institutions in the lower classes, the category most affected by these changes. How do the socioeconomic difficulties they face, their previous experiences and their social features affect the way members of these classes deal with institutions? In turn, what are the effects of renewed forms of institutional processing on their living conditions, social trajectories and attitudes? The main objective of this project is to compare the diverse and changing roles public institutions play in restructuring the lower classes as a social group in various national settings impacted by the neoliberal turn. In addition to its comparative perspective unprecedented in this field, it is innovative in two regards. First, it proposes a “people-centered” approach accounting for the citizens’ experiences and points of view, where most literature focuses on organizations and their agents. Second, it provides a comprehensive view of individual experiences, beyond institutional boundaries, whereas usually, when research is conducted on the clients’ side, it generally focuses on a category defined after a policy sector (*e.g.* welfare recipients).

NB: This working paper is intended to develop research collaborations in the perspective of an international comparison of the relationship between working-classes and institutions. This version refers mainly to European countries, but the program is not limited to them and is intended to be applicable to other contexts.

0. Overview

Daniel Blake is a 59-year-old widower who worked as a carpenter. After a heart attack, he must cease his activity, but is declared fit for work. As a result, he is not entitled to a health pension, and has to apply for jobs he cannot accept to be granted unemployment benefits. Symbolic degradation then adds to material difficulties: the shame of no longer working, the lack of recognition of his illness, the humiliation of being seen as a lazy man. The obligation to complete the steps online makes his experience with the bureaucracy even more difficult. Despite the discouragement, however, and thanks to mutually supportive relationships with others left behind, he does not give up. He appeals the decision of the Job center's doctor, and asserts himself by spray-painting his name and the reason for his appeal on the building. He eventually wins his case, unfortunately too late to avoid the tragic ending resulting from months of bureaucratic and social pressure. Sociologically speaking, Daniel Blake is a member the lower classes, defined after Bourdieu's framework as the dominated group of the social space, occupying subaltern positions in the division of labor and having low levels of economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984). He has gone from the established fraction of these classes to the precarious one. A fiction and a gesture of artistic protest, Ken Loach's 2016 film introduces the initial questions underlying this project. *How do institutions reformed under the neoliberal era impact both the material living conditions and the symbolic status of people experiencing socioeconomic problems? How do these people cope with institutions, navigate, apprehend and judge them?* LOCI expands on these questions through a qualitative sociology approach, starting from the point of view of the members of the lower classes who are most directly confronted to these questions. It proposes a *people-centred approach* aimed at comparing in various national settings impacted by the neoliberal turn the diverse and changing roles public institutions play in the lives of members of the lower classes, and in the restructuring of these classes as a social group.

Since the 1980s, major social and economic hardships, taking on specific forms and intensities from country to country and period to period have affected European societies (Immerfall and Therborn 2010) as well as other parts of the world. The lower classes are particularly exposed to these struggles. Unemployment, underemployment, poverty and precariousness have resurfaced at levels that were thought to have been definitively over. Members of the lower classes are respectively twice and five times more likely to be unemployed than members of the middle and upper classes (Hugrée, Penissat, and Spire

2017), and large proportions of them face the risk of poverty and precariousness. Employment and financial problems have direct effects on living conditions and on all dimensions of social life, from housing to education and health, and generate problems regarding parenthood, school performance or crime. Again, members of the lower classes are the most critically exposed to such risks.

In the meantime, public policies and institutions have if not declined, at least been redefined under what is generally referred to as the neoliberal turn (Saad-Filho and Johnston 2005). While it has taken on various forms and intensities by country and period, this change is a widely shared trend. It has resulted in particular in budgetary pressures, new modes of governance redefining the public/private divide, *new public management* reforms geared towards more efficiency in public administrations and services, individual accountability and responsabilization of both agents and the public. Far from a unilateral withdrawal of the state, neoliberalism has redefined its functions and modes of intervention, reinforcing discipline and coercion over subaltern groups such as the poor and migrants (see Wacquant 2009 on the American case).

In this time of long-lasting economic struggle, welfare reform and retrenchment has made it more difficult to answer increasing and more pressing needs and demands. Individualization, contractualization and sanctions have increased the stakes of direct encounters with institutions (Dubois 2013; Ervik, Kildal, and Nilssen 2016). Administrative reform, including dematerialization, has significantly impacted relations with the public, as *I, Daniel Blake*, strongly illustrates. This has been especially true for the lower classes, who are more financially dependent on public support, and who are more subject to institutional supervision in various aspects of their lives, such as housing or family.

LOCI questions the modalities and implications of the confrontation of these two series of macrosocial changes: on the one hand, the increasing social and economic hardship experienced by a growing proportion of the population; on the other hand, the redeployment if not the withdrawal of public policies and services that are supposed to provide answers. It analyzes how they concretely intersect, by examining the socially and spatially located relationships (*loci*) between the lower classes which most face these difficulties and the institutions with which they are directly involved. In this perspective, the core hypothesis of this project consists in positing that *the tension and various combinations between influence and disengagement of institutions play a key role in the living conditions of the lower classes and in their de- or re-structuring as a social group*. This hypothesis guides our two initial

comparative questions: *What are these combinations in diverse national settings? What are their impacts on the various local configurations of the lower classes?*

1. State of the art

The comparative analysis of social classes and stratification in contemporary societies is curiously very limited (on Europe, see Haller 1990; Huguée et al. 2017; Penissat and Siblot 2017). It is mainly focused on social capital (Pichler and Wallace 2009), social mobility (Curtis 2016) more than on class structure or classes themselves, and has so far rarely focused on the lower classes, apart from historical research on the working class. There is hardly any sociological work on the lower classes focusing on their relationship to institutions, even less so from a comparative perspective.

To analyze the relationships between public services and citizens, most of the existing literature focuses on bureaucracies and on the work of their agents. This remark also applies to my own previous research (Dubois 2010, 2014). One of the main research streams in this domain is street-level bureaucracy analysis, first developed in the United States, and now influential in sociology, social work, political science, public administration and policy analysis in Europe and in other parts of the world (Hupe 2019; Lipsky 1980). While not specifically targeting interactions including members of the lower classes, and most of the time not even referring to the notions of class and social position, this body of research most often sheds light on the way public institutions deal with deprived populations (welfare claimants, the urban poor, undocumented migrants, marginalized ethnic groups). Even if direct relationships are key to such analyses, these relationships are mostly considered from the viewpoint of the organization and professionals. This also applies to comparative literature (Berkel, Caswell, and Kupka 2017; Jewell 2007). In other words, SLB analysis, as socio-anthropological research in this field (see for example Fassin 2015), teaches us more about how decisions are made than on their impact on people; on the way bureaucratic power and discretion are exerted than on how clients comply with them or challenge them; on how criteria are used and situations are officially defined than on their acceptance by those subjected to these practices. This project complements this literature by focusing on the second terms of these alternatives.

When research is conducted on the clients' side, it generally focuses on the impact of a specific reform or on a population defined by a policy sector. The first case can be illustrated by fascinating research in which scholars working on the life of specific communities and

social groups have come to critically assess the impacts of the late 1990s welfare reforms on their living conditions (Hays 2002; Morgen and Maskovsky 2003). The second case is illustrated by numerous and various studies on groups identified on the basis of one of the type of services provided by a specific organization (single mothers, long-term unemployed, asylum seekers, pensioners, hospital clients), and are therefore considered through the angle of a single aspect of their social life and status. The few comparative studies focusing on the experience of people confronted with institutions and the policies they implement concentrate on a particular type of problem or public corresponding to official categories, as for instance unemployment policies and the unemployed (Gallie and Paugam 2000; Sugita and Kase 2006). This can be perfectly relevant when the focus is on a specific domain (see for instance the most interesting volume of Biehl and Petryna 2013 on health). In this project, I define the population to observe on the basis of sociological criteria in terms of position in the social space rather than of predefined relationships to a specific institution. This is crucial as it will avoid reproducing official categories which reduce individuals to an institutional status and segmenting dimensions of their life which they experience as a whole. This will enable me to provide a comprehensive view of the role played by various institutions in individual situations and trajectories, and to propose the hypothesis of transferable dispositions and skills from one institution to another.

2. Definition of the terms

The two central concepts of LOCI's approach require clarification. *The lower classes* are defined after Bourdieu's framework as the dominated fractions of the social space (Bourdieu 1984). This relational rather than substantial approach is particularly useful in a comparative perspective (Hugrée, Penissat, and Spire 2017). It also enables a comprehensive perspective, including a set of complementary distinctions such as gender, nationals/foreigners, rural/urban, in comparison with the more one-sided views of other widespread categorizations such as the *urban poor* or the *underclass*. Two main criteria distinguish the lower classes from other classes: first, a socioeconomic one (subaltern position in the division of labor, low economic capital, income under the median level); second, a cultural one (low level of educational attainment, specific lifestyle and cultural tastes distant from the legitimate and socially prestigious ones) (see Savage 2015 on UK; Schultheis and Cardia-Vonèche 2009 on Switzerland; Siblot et al. 2015 on France). The combination of these criteria makes it possible to identify an ensemble of social positions that represents 43% of the working age population

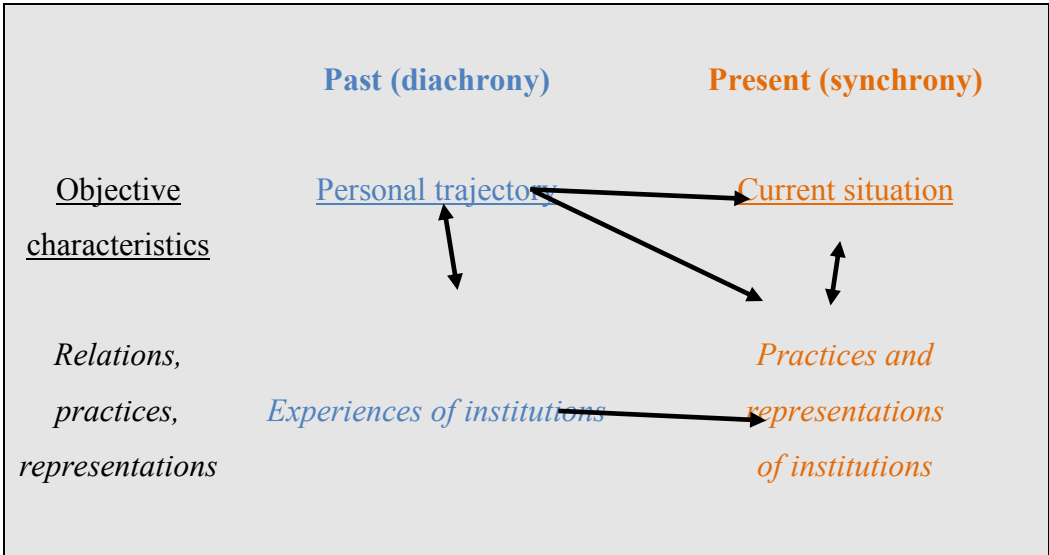
in the EU (Hugrée et al. 2017). Although sociologically coherent, this ensemble is far from fully homogeneous and is divided into three subsets. The *established fraction* is composed of low-ranking factory workers, clerks, self-employed workers and farmers, who enjoy (relatively) stable jobs from which they get most of their income. The *precarious fraction* is permanently unemployed. Its members mostly depend on welfare benefits or the informal economy. Members of the *intermediary fraction* are “working poor”, or alternate between various forms of employment, underemployment and unemployment. This notion is more adapted to the social groups under scrutiny than the common one of working class(es), precisely because a significant proportion of them is now structurally outside or on the fringes of the labor market.

Second, while public services are at the core of this project, I prefer to refer to the broader notion of *institutions*. The official and legal definitions of *public services* are less consistent with LOCI’s bottom-up approach. They vary a great deal from one national setting to another, which makes international comparison more difficult in this perspective. Moreover, they have been blurred by new organizational and governance models such as “outsourcing” (Lipsky and Smith 1989), making the boundaries with charities and private companies less and less clear to people who deal with them, in the fields of welfare, job placement, housing and even in traditional functions at the core of state practices such as police enforcement and the examination of asylum applications. The notion of institution is more open and more attuned to sociological reasoning. I define it as an organization which: a) is a socio-historical construct which delineates a set of pre-existing norms and rules constraining individuals; b) encompasses a series of social roles that embody and concretize it; c) is vested with a form of authority which legitimates a differentiated distribution of services and goods among the population, the official acknowledgment and granting of social statuses and the exertion of coercion; d) is based on and conveys symbols and systems of thought (Meyer and Rowan 1977). This approach applies Durkheim’s broad definition of institutions as “crystallized social forms” to organizations. As exposed by Lagroye and Offerlé (Lagroye and Offerlé 2011), it combines the contributions of varied but nevertheless compatible sociological traditions such as social constructivism (Berger and Luckmann 1990), interactionism (Goffman 1961), Neo-Durkheimian studies (Douglas 1986) and Bourdieu’s theory (Bourdieu 1990, 2014). This is quite different from what is phrased as “new institutionalism” (Powell and DiMaggio 1991) which, in its various disciplinary and theoretical versions, mainly considers institutions as independent variables explaining policy orientations and individual practices. I consider institutions as the *loci* of relationships between individuals (here,

ordinary citizens) with the macro social system in its concrete form, or, to put it like Hallet and Ventresca, “inhabited institutions” (Hallett and Ventresca 2006). Without limiting myself to a pre-established list, the main institutions with which members of the lower classes deal include the school system, tax and civil registry authorities, childhood and social services in the broad sense, housing and employment agencies, health institutions, the police, local elected officials, in some cases the orphanage, justice, prison.

3. Research object and framework

The following graph summarizes what I mean by relationship to institutions, considered at the individual level as the current practices and representations regarding institutions, in relation to past and present objective characteristics and to previous experiences of institutions.



On this basis, relationship to institutions is broken down into four questions: at the material level, *what individuals do with and within institutions* (types of practices, forms of know-how, behaviors), and *what institutions do to individuals* (the effects of confrontation to institutions on personal trajectories and living conditions); at the symbolic level, *how individuals view institutions*, approach, value and judge them, and *how institutions shape their visions of themselves and of the social world* (the impact of institutional experience on the definition of their personal social status, their vision of other social groups, their values and feelings of justice). This approach draws on Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1990), both as it carries ways of being and thinking that orient relationships to institutions, and, conversely, as

individuals acquire ways of behaving and of seeing throughout their experiences with institutions.

These experiences shape dispositions towards institutions (*e.g.* trust or distrust, gratefulness or resentment). More broadly, they convey a wide range of behavioral norms on matters ranging from punctuality to parenting. Institutions grant statuses and provides social identities that may be, to an extent which has to be established, internalized as individual self-definitions. Since these identities are also collectively built in relation to others, I posit that institutional experiences provide occasions to shape a sense of belonging to a group and visions of others in a social and symbolic “boundary work” (Lamont 2000). Here I am thinking in particular of the way welfare reform has contributed to reinforcing distinctions within the lower classes, between those who work and those who do not, those who deserve support and the others, those who comply with the rules and those who abuse the system. Last, institutional experiences have political implications. They are conducive to “policy feedbacks”, that is, judgements on policies as they are concretely perceived which impact political preferences and practices (Mettler and Soss 2004). Here, I posit that neoliberal reforms leading to reduced access to public services and goods and feelings of abandonment and injustice in the lower classes are part of the reasons for an increased distance between these classes and the political system, observed through electoral abstention (Armingeon and Schädel 2015), the rise of populist social movements and voting.

Members of the lower classes have a specific and particularly strong relationship to public institutions. First, their dependence on institutions, the frequency of their interactions with them and the impact of institutions on their lives are more important than for members of other classes. The various forms of social assistance constitute a much larger part of their revenues. For identical issues (such as housing, education, family conflicts or health), they make greater use of public bodies than middle- and upper-class members, who turn more easily to the private sphere. Some institutional forms of supervision are specifically dedicated to the lower classes (such as social work), others effectively mainly concern them (such as parenthood support programs), or are much more likely to intervene in their lives (such as the police and imprisonment).

Second, while they are more exposed to institutions and interact more with them, the socio-cultural distance separating them from the norms governing institutions is paradoxically greater than for other classes. Their low level of cultural capital reduces their ability to master the bureaucratic language and to grasp complex systems of rules and overlapping

organizations. They can however acquire skills and mobilize alternative resources to find their way around and cope with a world which may appear to them as opaque and foreign. Moreover, the lifestyle and “moral economy” (Thompson 1971) of the lower classes may differ from the dominant value system that institutions convey and seek to impose. This can lead to incomprehension on both sides, when clients do not comply with explicit or implicit behavioural rules (such as tidying up papers properly, being on time for appointments, calmly explaining a problem). This also leads more generally to misunderstandings and conflicts regarding social norms (of parenthood, dietary practices, “useful” expenses, behavior in public spaces) where institutions may label standard lower-class practices as “deviant”. Such conflicts are inherently unequal, and interactions with institutions generate situations calling individuals to social and symbolic order, all the more so as these individuals can mobilize fewer resources and are more dependent on institutions. Here neoliberal rationales meet with neo-paternalistic ones (Soss, Fording, and Schram 2011).

These structural characteristics have been increasing in intensity over the last decades. Because of growing economic difficulties, the experience of unemployment and precariousness has become part of the daily lives of the lower classes and a marker that distinguishes them from other classes. Unemployment thus affects the lower classes more than twice as much as the middle classes, and more than five times as much as the upper classes (respectively 11%, 5% and 2% in 2011, Huguée et al. 2017:63). This has worsened their financial dependence on unemployment and welfare benefits and intensified interactions with institutions granting them. With or without direct links to these economic and employment conditions, a number of socioeconomic problems such as housing or health have reinforced the social demand for institutional support, while institutional responses to some others such as migration and delinquency have been strengthened. Members of the lower classes are in every case at the frontline of these renewed relationships between institutions and socioeconomic problems. As Auyero puts it, “Economic globalization and neoliberal hegemony notwithstanding, the downsized, decentralized, and “hollowed out” state [...] is still a key actor in the lives of the destitute” (Auyero 2012:5) as well as those with precarious and irregular employment status and revenues.

This does not imply that the lower classes have necessarily benefited from or have been subjected to an ever-increasing presence of institutions in their lives. This may be the case for specific categories, such as the youth of deprived urban areas or migrants who have faced a growing institutional repression (Wacquant 2009). Yet, many places and social groups have, on the contrary, been confronted with downsizing in public services and welfare retrenchment

leading to a reduction of the possibilities to receive institutional support even when they qualify. In these cases, if lower classes experience less direct influence of institutional processing in their daily life, they are nevertheless the most impacted by policy and institutional changes. Rather than overestimating the role of institutions, the hypothesis therefore consists in positing that *the tension and various combinations between influence and disengagement of institutions play a key role in the living conditions of the lower classes in European societies and in their de- or re-structuring as a social group.*

4. A new perspective

LOCI is innovative in its object (the relationship to institutions of the lower classes) and in its comparative perspective, aimed at analyzing *the diverse and changing roles public institutions play in the life of the lower classes and their contribution to restructuring them as a social group in various national settings.* It is also innovative in its analytical framework, which proposes a double change in perspective: *shifting the analysis of the relationships between institutions and their publics from organizations, rules and professional practices to a people-centered approach; considering individuals in their relationships with and to institutions no longer simply as their clients but as social agents defined by their social characteristics and considered in the totality of their life and trajectory.*

The first shift may be referred to the one made by “legal consciousness” studies, wherein law is not considered as a set of pre-existing rules (law in books), or from the point of view of its professional uses (law in practice), but as it is known, perceived and used by ordinary citizens (Sarat 1990), who stand before the law (as an unknown world), make do with the law (get around it), or fight against the law (Ewick and Silbey 1998). Similarly, I consider institutions as they are known, perceived, experienced and used by ordinary people and insofar as they matter in their lives.

The second change, consisting in considering individuals facing institutions in their social depth, draws on Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, defined as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes” (Bourdieu 1990:53). This notion enables me to combine the individual level with the macro level of social structures, which are internalized by individuals and are realized (externalized) through their practices. Habitus constructed in the family and social milieus during primary socialization includes *generic* patterns of practice

(e.g. manners of speech) and dispositions (e.g. towards authority) activated in subsequent relationships with institutions. It also includes dispositions (e.g. administrative skills, legalism) *specific* to institutional relationships. Conversely, individuals acquire ways of behaving in institutions and ways of seeing institutions throughout their experiences with them. I posit that these experiences also shape *habitus* more generally, as may for instance be observed in the “disciplinary” functions institutions sometimes fulfil (Soss et al. 2011). They also orient how individuals find their way in social space, view others, define their sense of justice.

Whereas an important part of recent research on the anthropology of the state focuses on images and symbols while public administration literature leaves them aside to focus on the most material aspects, I will tie together practices and representations (Thelen, Vettters, and Benda-Beckmann 2018). In line with the theory of habitus, I analyze the two-way relationship between the lower classes and institutions at both material and symbolic levels. *At the material level*, the relationship to institutions is first referred to the social uses, direct interactions and practices of the public (*what individuals do with and within institutions*). Depending on their characteristics and their social trajectories, people do not cope with the same institutions in the same way and range from inability and powerlessness to resourcefulness and profane administrative skills. One of the objectives of this research is to show how the different types of institutions, uses and effects of these institutions vary according to the habitus and characteristics of members of the different fractions of the lower classes.

I will pay attention to all characteristics which, in addition to ‘class’ strictly speaking, define social positions, such as gender (Skeggs 1997), age, national status and ethnicity (Lamont et al. 2016), and place of residence. For instance, the gendered division of bureaucratic work in couples tends to give women a predominant share of the paperwork and administrative procedures, and tends to distribute tasks differently depending on which matters are concerned. I will also pay attention to the socially differentiated conditions of access to public services, in relation to social and cultural capital, place of residence, in a context of institutional developments such as the closure of offices and the dematerialization of procedures, which bring into play new requirements and skills to navigate complex administrative environments. The place of residence is an important element. Members of the lower classes live much more frequently in rural areas than members of the other classes (about a third in European countries, see Hugrée et al. 2017), yet these areas are increasingly deserted by public services. The suburbs and disadvantaged areas of large cities almost

exclusively populated by members of the lower classes concentrate social problems at the same time as the scarcity of public services or conflicts with their agents. The material relationship to institutions symmetrically refers to the impact institutional experiences have on people (*what institutions do to individuals*). This can be of crucial importance for education, income, housing or family life. Here I will pay specific attention to the interactions between events in the life path such as a layoff or a divorce and institutional interventions such as life-long learning or re-housing programs in the dynamics of social trajectories. Abbott's notion of "turning point" will help me understand how relationships to institutions impact and are impacted by changes in individual life courses (Abbott 2001). The interactionist notion of "career" will here be useful to account for the role institutions play in the succession of social positions, changes of institutional statuses, and the succession of points of view on these changes, which leads us to the symbolic dimension.

At the symbolic level, the relationship to institutions relates to *how individuals view institutions*, approach, value and judge them. This depends on variables such as family background, socioeconomic condition, gender and country of origin. Here, I will pay special attention to social mobility, following the hypothesis which holds that improvement in one's situation predisposes to favorable attitudes towards institutions, perceived as useful support systems, whereas social downgrading may lead to more negative dispositions towards them, viewing them as useless, if not partly responsible for one's decline. Together with individual social characteristics, these representations are constructed during previous institutional experiences, during which expectations, feelings of trust and justice have been shaped. Being saved from probable school failure or, on the contrary, being pushed aside by a teacher, having received social assistance at a critical moment or, on the contrary, having been denied help, are experiences that contribute to conceptions of institutions as they add up.

Conversely, the symbolic relationship to institutions relates to *how institutions shape their visions of themselves and of the social world*, the definition of their personal social status, their vision of other social groups, their principles of judgement. One does not meet with "society", but interacts with materializations and embodiments of social norms and structures which define "society" as opposed to "the individual" (Elias 2001). One of the values of the notion of institution in its Durkheimian legacy precisely lies in the fact that institutions actualize, represent and reproduce for individuals the preestablished collective constructs that indissociably support and constraint them. The experience of institutions can therefore be viewed as the occasion to face "society" as an individual, who is part of it, but distinguished from it.

However, individualization, which can constitute a structural feature of institutional relations (Goffman 1961), is a major trend in recent developments in public policies and institutions driven by neoliberal reforms. This is the reason why interactions with institutions can play a decisive role in the formation of individual visions of society and provide the occasion to express them. Feelings of justice or injustice, of solidarity or abandonment, attitudes towards the political sphere and the social system are rooted in the concrete experiences of public institutions. Here we may generalize Piven and Cloward's formulation: "People on relief experience the shabby waiting rooms, the overseer and the case-worker, and the dole. They do not experience American social welfare policy. [...] [I]t is the daily experience of people that shapes their grievances, establishes the measure of their demands, and points out the targets of their anger" (Piven and Cloward 1979:20–21).

Relationships to institutions define social identities and statuses (disabled or not, single mother or not), and in so doing guide the social definition of individuals (being considered and considering oneself as disabled or a single mother). The "looping effect" of this institutional "making up of people" (Hacking 1998) results in the internalization and appropriation by individuals of the way institutions define them. In any case, institutional experiences shape individual self-definitions, contrasted with others. This is why institutions matter in recognition processes, be it through "recognition gaps" and as factors for stigma and de-stigmatization (Lamont et al. 2016).

Institutional experiences also shape the sense of belonging to a collective, again contrasted with others. Here I will show the role institutional changes play in the evolution of social and symbolic boundary-making between groups. I refer here in particular to the effects of the redefinition of social space on the fragmentation of the lower classes (Siblot et al. 2015). While the forms of solidarity of the traditional welfare state have contributed to the unity of the "working class", defined mostly in opposition to the higher classes as in the distinction between "them" and "us" documented by Richard Hoggart in the British working-class of the 1950s (Hoggart 1957), welfare reforms reintroducing distinctions between "the established and the outsiders" (Elias and Scotson 1994), those who work and those who do not, those who "make efforts" and deserve support and those who do not, together with the rise of unemployment, migration and urban segregation, have created or reinforced internal divisions and competition within the lower classes.

In particular, the institutional stigmatization of welfare recipients has become internalized by members of the lower classes, who, without speaking of possible individual effects in terms of non-take-up of welfare benefits to avoid stigma, tend to distinguish themselves from

those with inferior social and symbolic statuses (*e.g.* employees *vs.* “welfare scroungers”, nationals *vs.* migrants, residents of “good neighborhoods” *vs.* tenants of dilapidated housing projects). Many countries widely share this general trend in their otherwise contrasted welfare systems, and vary in the way social groups interact one with another, this approach will contribute to a comparative analysis of the impacts of policies on “boundary work” and social (e)valuation, in complement to the research done by Michèle Lamont (Lamont 2000).

Insofar as institutions are generally materialized by buildings and concrete spatial arrangements, they are spatially located. This location can have an impact on individuals’ practices and representations, and we will therefore take this *spatial dimension* into account. The “geography of the safety net” Allard proposes in the case of American welfare shows that the location of social services greatly affects the ability of those in need to access and utilize services. “Inadequate spatial access to providers is tantamount to a person’s being denied assistance” (Allard 2009:6). I will draw on this approach and complement it in three ways. First, I will extend the hypothesis of the effects of the geographical location of services beyond the case of welfare. Second, I will address this question from the clients’ point of view, and seek to understand how their appropriation of geographical space intervenes in their relationships to public institutions. Third, as will be the case in the project more generally, I will pay close attention to the symbolic implications of spatial location. The remoteness of institutions often experienced by people living in rural areas or outlying urban districts makes it more difficult to apply for public assistance, separates them from the world of ordinary exchanges, and fosters a feeling of being abandoned by the authorities. The proposed approach thus integrates the spatial dimension of social relations less in the Foucaultian perspective of spatial arrangements as devices of governmentality, than to compare *the spatial conditions of the relationship to institutions*, and to analyze *the effects of these conditions on this relationship* (more or less ease of access, familiarity or intimidation, continuity or rupture with daily social relations). These questions are not made less relevant, quite on the contrary, by the growing trend towards the dematerialization of access to public services, which, precisely, is transforming the spatial dimension of relationships.

This framework is inspired by the *sociology of domination* as conceived by Weber (Weber 1978) and re-worked by Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2014). In this perspective, legitimacy is central, since domination requires the acceptance of those subjected to it. At least tacitly, this is the case when people turn to institutions to solve their problems and accept their decisions. For this reason, domination is not only about coercion, but also about the maintenance of social

and symbolic order and justification. In the same way, this time in keeping with the Durkheimian tradition, I consider institutions under their inseparable dual aspects of constraint and support (Durkheim 1982). The school system, the police and welfare discipline, stigmatize and punish as well as protect, care and empower. Finally, with regard to the lower classes as dominated categories, I stand at an equal distance from miserabilism and populism (Grignon and Passeron 2015). Miserabilism would be conducive to a unilateral negative view of the member of these classes as deprived of any resources, skills and tactics, passively undergoing institutional injunctions. On the contrary, this research will identify the ways they can get support and acquire profane expertise to cope with institutions and deploy strategies to reach their own goals in institutional relationships, however unequal (Dubois 2010:137–82). Accounting for “mean forms of trickery” (Hoggart 1957:75) and for “the arts of resistance” provides in this vein a good antidote to miserabilism (Scott 1990). Encounters with the police, applications for social welfare, solicitation of an elected representative are occasions for what Scott has phrased as “hidden transcripts”, these forms of infrapolitical resistance (*i.e.* not explicitly formulated as such in public), which consist in simulating false adherence to the dominant norms, playing with the rules, concealing information, circulating gossip. Forgetting that these forms of resistance take place in power relations which remain unequal would however lead to a form of populism, in the sense of the romanticizing exaltation of the virtues and freedom of the dominated (Tilly 1991). Rather than being all on one side or the other, the relationship of the lower classes to institutions deploys itself mainly in the grey area between compliance and contestation, between submission and rebellion.

This brings us to the *political implications* of relationships to institutions. A first way to consider these implications consists in viewing institutional relationships as occasions to exercise citizenship. Demanding one’s rights and asking officials for support is in this perspective a way to assert oneself as a member of the polity and a form of political participation, which, in the case of the most underprivileged often far from political life and with a low propensity to participate in elections, can prove more important than voting (Peterson 1988). This can be the case under certain conditions, but, to use Auyero’s words, those in need are more frequently “patients of the state”, waiting for its decisions, than citizens actively participating in their making (Auyero 2012). If there is something political in relationship to institutions, it has probably more to do with the experience of public authorities they bring. As we have seen with Piven and Cloward, it is the daily experience with the case worker or the police that shapes perceptions and evaluations of institutions and policies, and, on this basis, attitudes towards public authorities and the political system.

Feelings of (in)justice, perspectives of improvement or deterioration regarding employment or security are rooted in such experiences, and, in turn, determine political attitudes. Rather than establishing abstract correlations between values expressed in survey questionnaires and socioeconomic characteristics, as it is the case in the main part of the literature on “welfare attitudes” (Andreß and Heien 2001), this project will therefore explain these attitudes by showing how they are rooted in concrete situations and experiences. The same applies to political attitudes. According to political sciences literature on policy feedbacks, “policy makes mass politics” (Campbell 2012). But to do so, policy must be known by “the masses”. In the case of the lower classes who have scarcer access to political information, and in a context of decline of activism in mass political parties and trade unions as a vehicle for political socialization, policy is mainly known and evaluated *via* direct experience or experiences in the close social circle. We can therefore agree with Pollitt and extend his formulation beyond welfare when he writes that “citizen interactions with public services [...] help to shape larger attitudes to government and public authority” (Pollitt 2012:13). This brings us to the question of trust in institutions, which, like that of welfare attitudes, is most often addressed in large surveys disconnecting it from concrete experience (Eurofound 2018). However, distrust in institutions and political actors, which is said to have grown especially in the lower classes over the last decade, has negative effects on voting and can contribute to the rise of populist parties in Europe (Norris 2005) as in other parts of the world, such as Brazil or the USA. Again, we will reconsider these questions from the point of view of the lived experiences of these classes, to explore the complex links between policies as they are concretely perceived and lived by individuals subjected to them and larger political attitudes, as, for instance, Joe Soss did when he highlighted the influence of individual experiences of social services on political orientations (Soss 1999).

The construction of relationship to institutions as a specific research object and the resulting system of hypotheses are aimed at ensuring the coherence of the project while opening up a set of new questions and ideas to feed and enrich it. I will highlight four in particular. Since in its definition, institutions exist through practices, this project looks at the ordinary practices of the public as they are oriented by institutional settings. *Dematerialization and the rise of e-administration* has dramatically impacted access to public services and benefits (Pollitt 2012). On the one hand, it facilitates paperwork and helps avoiding often painful waits and visits to offices. On the other hand, it adds a technical obstacle to the already existing ones. This is especially the case for members of the lower

classes who lack computer literacy. However, we may link administrative and digital inequalities (DiMaggio et al. 2004) to posit that the main problem lies less in the lack of technical skills of users than in the fact that dematerialization reinforces pre-existing barriers. This prevents clients from getting explanations and therefore implies a greater mastery of language and administrative procedures. This also prevents them from explaining their cases, and therefore reinforces the rigidity of bureaucratic categories that do not always fit them.

Dematerialization is part of the changes leading to a growing social and spatial distance between institutions and members of the lower classes. To reduce this distance, the latter use *bureaucracy intermediaries* who (supposedly) master the institutional machinery better than them, and help in their procedures. These intermediaries can be family members or neighbors with better language, writing and administrative skills. Intermediation can be a dedicated function, as is the case for interpreters or facilitators. It is sometimes an informal extension of the role of professionals, as when medical doctors help their patients facing administrative difficulties with no relation to health. Analyzing who asks for the help of intermediaries, and of which type of intermediation, will contribute to our analysis of informal resources as a compensation for the lack of administrative skills (be it sometimes by adding interpersonal dependence to bureaucratic dependence), and show how, despite individualization, relations with institutions can be deployed in collective arrangements.

Institutional practices are unequally shared according to gender. A third question will therefore consist in considering *relationships with institutions as gendered relationships*. Wacquant has shown in the case of African American urban poor that facing the state tends to be equivalent of entering the coercive judicial and prison system for men, while it is more about dealing with welfare officials for women (Wacquant 2009). If the differentiation is not always so clear-cut, there is a sectorial distribution of relationships with institutions according to gender roles, as when women deal with services related to childhood and education, while men manage financial questions and services. Regardless of the administration, the gendered division of domestic labor places a greater burden on women. This inequality is particularly marked in the case of the lower classes. Considering relationships with institutions as gendered relationships also means paying attention to the confrontation and adjustment between gender roles as conveyed by institutions and as defined in various socio-cultural milieus. Beyond the case of welfare and the debate between subordination or emancipation on which most of the literature focuses (Orloff 1996; Serre 2017), addressing these questions in regards to class and race in addition to gender will contribute to comprehend how institutions reproduce or reshape gender relations among the lower classes.

Our comparative perspective will also highlight the institutional factors, making it possible to account for national differences without resorting to the facilities of spontaneous culturalism (which, for example, considers the contrast between the egalitarian model of Northern Europe with the traditional patriarchal model of the South as an undisputed fact).

The fourth and last point I will mention among the set of secondary questions addressed in the project pertains to *the specific institutional experiences of migrants* (Fassin 2005; de Koning 2018). There are more foreigners in the lower classes than in the other classes. In the European Union for example, the proportion of non-EU nationals is three times higher in the lower classes (6%) than in the middle and upper classes (2% each) (Hugrée et al. 2017:60). According to LOCI's global perspective, we will take their experiences and points of view as an object. In addition to the importance and interest of this population *per se*, its study is particularly relevant in this project for two main reasons. First, migrants have experienced institutions in their home country, and their primary institutional habitus has been shaped in this context. As a result, they are likely to have imported ways of looking at and dealing with institutions as they arrived in their new country of residence. They are also likely to draw spontaneous comparisons between the various national contexts they have experienced. These profane comparisons are of interest to us insofar as they question the taken-for-grantedness of institutions, and reveal what matters to people regarding institutions. Second, migrant trajectories consist to a significant degree in institutional careers, that is, as I already mentioned, in a succession of institutional experiences and statuses that relates to personal trajectory, and in a succession of points of views on these two combined series of changes. Applying for a visa or for asylum, successfully or not, fearing police checks, waiting in refugee camps and detention centers, taking steps to find housing, employment, school, access health care: immigration and settlement in a country are marked by numerous stages that provide a myriad of opportunities to be confronted with institutions. Here I posit that the way in which these steps and confrontations take place shape what I would call the secondary institutional habitus of the migrants, with long lasting effects on their relationships to institutions. Trust or fear and defiance, gratitude or resentment may result from these experiences. This will be the occasion to address the controversial question of "institutional racism" (Phillips 2011), by analyzing discriminatory practices as they are experienced, identified and described by individuals exposed to them. Without forgetting their specificities, migrants deserve our special attention because they illustrate in a particularly acute way the differentiated steps of institutional habitus formation, the combination of individual trajectory

and institutional career, and the experience of discrimination, which are all questions that concern the lower classes in general and are key to this project.

6. Method

The relational definition of the lower classes brings to consider them in light of the national social structure rather than imposing a common definition based on predefined criteria. For instance, a (low) level of cultural capital is evaluated according to the social distribution of diplomas rather than on the basis of a single preestablished educational attainment. The same applies to institutions, which are understood and defined in the social context of their uses and of their place in relation to other spaces of regulation such as the market or the family. Rather than using a predefined substantial notion of institution to decide whether a given organization should be regarded as such, we will ask in each case what institutions represent to people, which ones matter to them, for what aspect of their lives and how, and potential alternatives to recourse to public institutions.

Following this framework, the comparison pays attention both to material, practical elements (*e.g.* employment, residence, paperwork) and to symbolic ones (self-definition, moral attitudes, principles of vision of the social world). For the latter, I will draw on Michèle Lamont's comparison of cultural and moral principles used by members of a social group to differentiate themselves from other groups, and to establish distinctions within their group. Interacting with institutions provides numerous occasions for this "boundary work", and institutions themselves are evaluated on the basis of sociocultural values which need to be compared. Her research comparing working-class men in France and the USA is of particular interest to the project in this perspective (Lamont 2000).

The comparison will not consist in a national-scale survey, but rest on in-depth case studies in selected locations (*e.g.* a small town in a remote rural area, a deprived neighborhood of a large city) in order to contextualize our observations and results (Ragin and Becker 1992). While we are inspired by qualitative ethnographic methods, with some common points with "grounded theory" (Glaser and Strauss 1980), we will not follow an inductive perspective but start from our pre-established system of hypotheses, allowing for generic research questions and therefore systematically structured comparisons. To do so, we will follow (be it qualitatively) the reasoning in terms of variables, thereby reducing the opposition between qualitative and quantitative methods (Ragin 2014).

The objective of accounting for the functioning, the functions and the effects of institutions from the point of view of the individuals and groups exposed to them leads me to choose semi-structured interviews as a core method. It is the most adequate way to explore and combine the six interdependent variables defining relationship to institutions: social background and trajectory; current socio-economic situation; past and present experiences of institutions; institutional practices and skills; social representations and visions of/through institutions. Three main criteria that define *ethnographic interviews* (as opposed to standardized surveys) will structure our methodology. *Unity of place* in fieldwork ensures that interviewees will share common concrete conditions and experiences and will therefore refer to the same real-life institutions rather than only abstract notions such as “the state”. Secondly, the researchers’ *long-term presence in the field* will ensure prior knowledge of the interviewees, of their situations, and facilitate mutual trust. Last, we will pay attention to *the interaction context of the interviews*, both in their conduct and in their analysis. These ethnographic interviews will also be *comprehensive* ones, following Bourdieu’s model (Bourdieu 2000), taken up by Schultheis and Schulz in Germany (Schultheis and Schulz 2005, 2015), and partly similar to Charlesworth’s work in Northern England (Charlesworth 1999). This methodology is intended to allow for the expression of the interviewees’ points of view, without imposing questions and ways of thinking that are foreign to them. To do this, interviewers must try to put themselves in the place of the interviewees, that is, sociologically speaking, in the position they occupy in social space. To be faithful to this model while focusing on institutions, interviews will start as general and open life stories. In a second step, the interviewers will essentially ask follow-up questions relevant to the research based on the information spontaneously provided by the interviewee, for example, by asking them to elaborate on the role of the employment agency after a dismissal. The common interview guide will be adjusted to local specificities cases and research questions.

We will select the interviewees according to our definition of the lower classes, on the basis of criteria such as employment, income, education level, gender, citizenship and or age. Our objective is not to claim full statistical representativeness, but to build a robust and consistent corpus of diversified and revealing individual cases, sufficiently reflecting the structure of the lower classes in each country to enable generalization. The interviews will be processed using collectively defined templates, shared among the team. The coding of interviews in English or French will reduce the language barrier in the use of results. We will use the computer assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo, mainly for thematic analysis. The quite large number of interviewees makes it possible to process them in a

complementary quantitative way. First, multiple correspondence analysis (Le Roux and Rouanet 2004) will, for example, enable us to relate the social characteristics of individuals to the types of institutions they deal with, in order to establish the differentiated institutional treatment according to the various fractions of the lower classes and, in a second step, to compare it in our six national settings. Secondly, information concerning place of residence, location of institutions and travel to institutions will be processed via technical mapping to feed our socio-spatial analysis. We will use complementary sources and techniques, such as interviews with officials and informants, direct observation of encounters with institutions and related documents. Other specific methods may also be used depending on the themes expanded upon in individual contributions. The follow-up of judicial cases, from investigation to trial, is for example a tool that can be borrowed from socio-legal studies. Budget analysis, borrowed from economic sociology, can also prove valuable, especially since the financial management of certain lower classes households may be subjected to direct institutional monitoring.

7. References

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