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Book review:

The Bureaucrat and the Poor. Encounters in French Welfare
Offices

by Vincent Dubois
Ashgate, Farnham 2010

French bureaucracy is legendary. *L'administration* serves often as a stereotypical exemplum of impersonal, anti-human machinery reproducing needless documentation, rules, impeding the life of citizens and consequently finding new ways to justify its existence and omnipotence.

The relation between needy people and welfare system, which main role is to tell apart deserving poor from the undeserving ones, is complicated with plenty of possible interpretations, as well as ideological tensions. Vincent Dubois in his impressive study challenges both these phenomena. Without attempting to make any large scale generalizations of extrapolate its findings onto the whole welfare system, applying ethnographic approach to fieldwork, he analyzes everyday interactions in the welfare offices between family benefits applicants and front-line welfare providers, presenting readers with fascinating picture of complicated and manifold social interrelations.

Sociology of poverty, sociology of institutions, micro-sociological study of everyday interactions, poverty research, public administration research, ethnographic approach to fieldwork, the work of French scholar fits each of these descriptions. In this case traditional borders between sociological sub-disciplines and research approaches seem to be invalid. Yet, this eclecticism, bridging research approaches and combining theoretical and methodological references leaves no impression of chaos, as the selection of various instruments from sociological repertoire is purposeful and precisely adapted to the nature of studied phenomena.

The study starts with "Foreword" written by American scholar Steven Maynard-Moody and the author's "Preface to the English Edition", where he justifies his choices of crucial theoretical references, explaining circumstances of defining the research topic and reasons for selecting the specific approach. Author admits that the most important theoretical frameworks has been provided by works of Pierre Bourdieu, who also encouraged him to cross borders between various disciplines and approaches. However, author does not point at the specific operationalizations of the concepts derived from the theory of the French classic, treating him more like an inspiration than thoroughly testing his thesis. The references to Bourdieu, which are present in the whole course of the book, are selected pragmatically, but every time justified by the collected data. Another, relevant here, theoretical references are: street-level bureaucracy concept by Michael Lipsky and analysis of face-to-face interactions as described by Erving Goffman. When defining his empirical approach, Dubois names the

“perspective of the stranger” by Alfred Schütz as one of the most important inspirations, both when it comes to the ethnographic process of non-participatory observation chosen as a main research technique, and to the selecting of completely new field of the study. In personal remark, author claims that after defending thesis in political science, he was eager to find new field of research, as well as new fieldwork approach and this one seemed particularly interesting and difficult, and last but probably not least, not yet penetrated by French scholars. These approaches are selected quite conveniently without any kind of theoretical purism. The selection of research procedures and techniques from the instrumentation of qualitative methodology is thorough and well thought. Ethnographic techniques are coherently combined into innovative research project, carefully reconstructed and duly justified in the chapter on analytical framework and methodology. Both theory and methodology are subordinated to the task of derived from the type of researched phenomenon and specific kind of fieldwork.

The analysis is structured around three main points: first identities and social roles of interacting individuals meeting at the desk, second, the way of maintaining institutional order via managing tensions and producing consent in a course of interaction and third, the practices and functions in the institutional context of the interaction. Each of these themes is undertaken in one section of the book, subsequently: “The Social Conditions of the Administrative Relationship”, “The Agent’s Two Bodies” and “Questioning Institutional order”.

The study has been conducted in 1995 in two French welfare offices. Researcher has been present there for more than half a year. Posing as an intern he observed more than 900 interactions between agents and clients from the perspective of the silent witness. The main unit of observation here is an encounter in welfare office between welfare worker and the client. Each of them has been thoroughly described in the research notebook. This unique data is supplemented with long interviews with 22 agents working in aforementioned institutions. All of them played a crucial role in studied encounters, therefore brief profiles are provided in the annex. The last dataset consists of 120 shorter interviews with applicants conducted in the waiting room. Due to the discretion standards the real names of cities where the research has been conducted are replaced with fictional ones and all welfare agents are anonymized with pseudonyms.

Dubois challenges popular stereotypes and conventional wisdom both about the oppressive welfare institutions and the demand-driven attitude and learned helplessness syndrome prevalence among welfare recipients. To use the author’s words: “the fiction of impersonal bureaucrat is matched by the fiction of the standard client” (p. 3). Agents of the state, although limited by the whole set of legislative regulations play a crucial role in selection of applicants, in differentiating needy people from undeserving poor. Although the power relation here is quite clear and the domination of state agent is obvious, yet the clients are not passive and try to negotiate their position influencing judgments of the welfare officers. Even if social roles and identities are fixed and predetermined in this kind of interaction, the bureaucratic manner of communication do not constraint the interplay and negotiation process between the interaction partners. Author underlines that the decisive power of the agent has been strengthened with new welfare regulations about means tested benefits and case-to case based decision-making. This “management of the poor” is exemplified with numerous examples of difficult and complicated cases. Dubois do not restrain also from describing tensions, sometimes leading to the violence, between the institution and the client and among the clients, sometimes motivated by inter-ethnic hostility.

Data presented descriptively is very rich, but it is also complemented with thorough commentary and skillful analysis. Dense ethnographic narrative, full of details, containing large excerpts from the transcripts of interviews brings into mind “thick description” famously postulated by Clifford Geertz. The explanations and interpretations provided by the author with rigorous logic prove his impressive analytical skills. What needs to be underlined is the fact that author is very reluctant when it comes to formulating any kind of definite statements or strong generalizations, leaving space for particular interpretations of the readers. He is also careful not to simplify things, providing easy interpretations.

Welfare workers are not presented as gruesome oppressors of the poor, who are not idealized either. Close observation allows researcher to see behind the façade of impersonalized relation between agent and applicant and also to observe “second bodies” of both interacting individuals. Dubois sketches more complicated picture paying special attention to the level of individuals and to difficult, sometime turbulent relations between them. There are doubts arising from some of the institutional practices which lead to failures in the communication between interacting individuals hampering finding solutions and dissatisfying both sides of the encounter. However, neither ideological attack on the state and its institutions, nor the rigid criticism towards the poor’s attitudes could be found in this book. It provides us rather with impressive idiographic body of knowledge analytically reworked, sufficient for making own judgments.

What needs to be noted is that the research has been conducted in the mid-nineties of the 20th century. The reflection on the possible changes that occurred in the studied social reality since then is very brief. It contains just one page of the “Preface to English Edition” and do not answer questions which arises in a light of recent happenings in a widely understood social policy sphere in France.

Every reader owes also gratitude to the translator for making a great job. It is easy to forget that this book was not written in English, even though Jean-Yves Bart had a tremendously difficult task, especially while translating the quotations from people of various social backgrounds and dialogs between them and welfare agents. Hopefully, next contributions by Dubois will be also translated to make them accessible to those lacking command of French.

When one finds enthusiastic blurbs on the cover of academic book provided by two among scholars he respects most (in my case Abram de Swaan and Loïc Wacquant), it becomes obvious that he came across an essential reading and the expectations are set sky high. The volume by Vincent Dubois fulfills them all.

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