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The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices
Vincent Dubois
Farnham & Burlington, Ashgate, 2010
206 pp., ISBN: 978-1-4094-0289-3, £49.50 (hbk)

This is one of the most exciting books I have read for a very long time. Dubois does not miss the opportunity to demonstrate French sociology at its best. He has learned much from Pierre Bourdieu and combined him with the Chicago School (primarily Erving Goffman). Goffman is a well-known and widely used theoretician concerning asylums of all kinds. Bourdieu is becoming more and more embedded in social work and social pedagogy. However Bourdieu is interpreted in a particularly dogmatic way. Usually he—probably against his own intentions—becomes situated into some community or church of co-religionists who usually appear more dogmatic than Bourdieu himself. Dubois is not a believer in that sense; therefore, his analysis is not predictable.

Dubois's work consists of a theoretical and methodological introduction (a very readable one, in fact) plus three parts and a conclusion. The first part handles administrative conditions, while the second focuses on the two bodies of the agent (social worker). Part three is dedicated to the institutional order.

In the first part Dubois describes and analyses the work of public servants who in terms of doing as best as possible under severely changed circumstances have to deal with 'wasted lives' (Baumann). This field was originally well shaped and delimited as a help to ordinary people who were entitled to get allowances. The whole institution, however, has changed due to unemployment. The public using the welfare system has changed as well. Thereby, the identity of field workers has changed. The reviewer can do the author less than justice since space does not allow plenty of various examples of what happens at the encounters. The advice is: you need to read the book yourself.

It is obvious that the relations between social worker and client are asymmetrical, but Dubois shows the impact of various clients. Clients have voices and demands; they claim their rights, and the encounter reacts. Now and then we forget, but this empirical statement is important to social workers and social pedagogues.

In the second part ('The Agent's two Bodies') the author shows the new faces of the agents. 'While nowadays they no longer wear the official attributes (uniform, cap or badge) which identify whoever wears them with the function they symbolize, reception agents still work with objects (computers, forms) and a language (acronyms, administrative jargon) which make their person disappear behind their affiliation to an institutional entity' (p. 73), but simultaneously they 'are still concrete individuals' (ibid.).

This fact implies that agents have two faces—on one hand as functions of the institution and on the other as human beings trying to understand their visitors' needs. Under such circumstances much can be discussed and of course is discussed: their role, the way they interact with visitors, their personal feelings and emotions, etc. Dubois—deeply rooted in Bourdieu's tradition and loyal to it—therefore has to demonstrate why people are becoming agents (using metaphors as accident, escape, learning career, etc.) and continues by showing the individual dispositions of the agents, their reactions on facing misery, social inequality and their strategies to defend themselves (self-protection and self-division for example).

The third part concentrates on 'Questioning the Institutional Order'—a very fascinating part of Dubois' book by the way. He points to simple mistakes like lost documents or files, which force visitors to arrive and demand this or that. But he also points to visitors' silence and

develops three hypotheses to explain such silence (pp. 157–160) and combines this with challenges like ‘distance, defiance and distrust’. As repressed people are returning it is no surprise that violence might occur. This is also a very important lesson for social workers: How do they/we deal with violence? Calling the police, claiming bodyguards or…? At the end of part three Dubois shows how an institution represents a wide gap between the official uses and the actual ones (pp. 176–182) and how this in turn opens a space for new institutional roles. His laconic conclusion sounds as follows: ‘Visitors make new uses of family benefit offices: in the process, they change the agents’ roles and by doing so, drive street-level bureaucrats to complex and unplanned transformations’ (p. 182). Here we find another important lesson to be taught. Clients/visitors are actively defending their rights and entitlements and they are very creative when fighting.

Finally concerning the conclusion Dubois emphasizes that ‘relationship with the administration inspires irony at best, fear and moral indignation at worst’ (p. 183). And he goes on: ‘the relationship with the administration both articulates the individual and the social and distinguishes them. Hence, it constitutes a condensation of social relationships, or at least a decisive key to their understanding’ (ibid.).

The study deals with the fragility of bureaucratic roles, challenged by poor people (‘euphemistically and misleadingly referred to as ‘the excluded’…) (p. 184). An important aspect is that agents ‘are massively marked by isolation and ‘disaffiliation’, whatever the advocates of a romantic vision of the solidarities of the street and sub-proletarian sociabilities would have us to believe’ (ibid.).

The reader might shake his head and think: This is clearly evidence of bad social work in France. This has no relevance for Denmark, Germany, UK or wherever. Readers may learn a lot from this book—about bureaucracy, lack of empathy, insufficient help, etc, but also about how clients/visitors use their possibilities, how they develop strategies and how they conquer an institution and use it for other purposes. Now and then we forget the will to struggle against injustice and inequality among the repressed or sub-proletarian guests. The recommendation is clear: read the book!

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