

Vincent Dubois, *The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010.

Reviewed by Christine Bon, *Critical Social Policy*, 2012, 32: 151-153.

This book is an excellent introduction for readers who would like to take a glimpse at the complexity of applied French welfare policies and the challenging relationships welfare agencies have with the recipients of social allowances. Originally published in 1999 under the French title *La vie au guichet: relation administrative et traitement de la misère* (which could roughly be translated as 'Life at the counter: administrative relationship and treatment of misery'), Vincent Dubois' ethnographic work offers a very well documented portrait of the French administration habits and ways of 'welcoming the poor' in the offices.

Preceded by a foreword by Steven Maynard Moody and an introduction by the author, the book is organized in three parts. The first section describes the social context of the analysed encounters and the profiles of the 'client' families. The second part, which is crucial, scrutinizes the complex and multiple identity of the 'agent' in their professional role and their personal commitment and compassionate action towards the 'suffering client' in the context of the socially troubled dynamics of an asymmetrical relationship between welfare and social control. The emphasis of the third part is on the changes in the policy system and the adjustment of the new generation of professionals from the initial institutional culture to the new 'management of the poor'. The clerks' gradual awareness of the specific needs of the poor, in an administration traditionally dedicated to general family allowances which are not means tested, is excellently evoked, in terms both of the necessary renewal of the work organization and of the challenges involved for the professionals as social agents.

Dubois emphasizes the value of human experience in these face-to-face interactions in social welfare, revealing how professionals act to humanize a bureaucratic organization which seems unable to maintain control of technological development: for example, in the case of the family who claim that information about the situation of their son – dead in an accident a few

months previously – has been requested by ordinary mail four times in a row after they have already provided it. Scrutinizing the controlling power of an institution which tracks 'hidden' couples or 'false' single parents, Dubois also points out the contradictions of an institution unable to admit the existence of homosexual couples.

For English language readers, the book is useful in critical social policy terms because, whilst referring to some well known authors in the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon academic field such as Lipsky, Goffman, Esping-Andersen and Weber, Dubois also introduces and comments on those scarcely known in the 'Anglo-Saxon scholarly world': French sociologists such as Isabelle Astier, Claude Dubar and Robert Castel who have critically analysed French social policies for decades and whose work deserves to reach a larger international audience.

The main institution studied in the book is the CAF and 123 of them exist in France: administrative subdivisions with a social competence, at the local level, are 100. From a critical point of view, and having the knowledge of what specific role the CAF plays in the application of social policies for the 'disadvantaged', it is wrong to regard these workers as merely 'civil servants': they are definitely not. The social security system, albeit controlled by the state, is a multipartite organization run by employers and workers' unions with the help of a 'college' of qualified persons, but the structure of it is not described in the book. Although it might appear odd from a foreign point of view, while the CNAF, at the national level, is a public institution, the 123 local CAF are private – albeit not for profit – organizations and their policies

in terms of 'welcoming the poor' may considerably vary. I would have appreciated more of an emphasis on this aspect in order to reveal to international readers the sheer complexity of the social security system in France.

*The Bureaucrat and the Poor* is a major contribution to the deep understanding of the feelings, career strategies and professional commitment of those whose profession is often described as 'vocational' whilst, in the meantime, they suffer from not being trained nor recognized by the clients or their managers. According to the hierarchy, they are not even seen as 'genuine' social workers and are not being guided on how to conduct their jobs facing the poor on the 'front line'. The book shows that these professionals are not only distributing allowances at the 'cash counter', they play a crucial role in maintaining a basic and socially tolerable order during the harsh times of neo-liberalization and 'austerity'.