Welfare in France: A Review

written by Betty Reid Mandell | March 3, 2011

The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices
By Vincent Dubois
Ashgate, 2010
Originally published in French as *La vie au guichet: Relation administrative et traitement de la misère* By Economica, Paris 2010 (1st edition 1999) Translated by Jean Yves-Bart

This is a study of two French welfare offices, done in six months in 1995. Dubois says that it is the first study of French welfare offices ever done. He calls it a "critical policy ethnography." Dubois observed interactions between workers and clients, mostly at the reception desk. He is a political scientist/sociologist (he says that political science in France was redefined on a sociological basis in the 1980s). He was not a specialist in welfare policy, which he claims as an advantage as it left him free of preconceptions. I don't agree that it was an advantage. France has a complex welfare system — Dubois said there were more than 20 different programs at the time of his study — and it would be hard to understand some interactions between workers and clients without knowing something about how those systems fit together. For example, most of the clients (whom he calls "visitors") seem to receive housing benefits, but it is not clear whether those benefits are counted as income in computing other benefits. There is a glossary of acronyms in the book, but it would have helped to add a glossary of French social welfare benefits and how they fit together. The index is sketchy as it doesn't include some of the key themes of the book, such as "entitlement," "workfare," and "means-tested," and even leaves out the names of the benefit programs that the author discusses.

Dubois draws on the theories of Michael Lipsky (*Street Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services*), the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Erving Goffman, and Everett Hughes in this study. He combines Goffman's method of looking at everyday encounters with Bourdieu's sociology, which places interactions in the context of institutions and class, race, and gender.

This book is a warning sign about what happens when benefits are means-tested rather than universal. Those who advocate privatizing Social Security and Medicare in the United States are sounding the death knell for the dignity of those programs and their claimants. Some French benefits are universal, not means-tested. Benefits are funded by employer and employees' payroll contributions. They include health and retirement benefits. Everyone with at least 2 children under the age of 20 is entitled to a family allowance. This was originally aimed at increasing the birth rate.

In 1988, France added a new minimum benefit called the Revenu Mininum d'Insertion (RMI). Rising unemployment brought in a new, impoverished clientele, sometimes homeless, to the family benefit office. Those offices had previously dealt with people in more stable conditions, and workers (whom Dubois calls "agents") were confronted with massive poverty and had to shift their focus. Workers looked back longingly to the "golden age" when they served "normal people." Middle-class people who received the universal benefits came to the office only occasionally to straighten out some problem about receiving those benefits. They distanced themselves from the other clientele by a superior attitude. Workers tend to treat middle class clients with more respect.

The RMI is aimed at people of working age without any income and no rights to contributions-based employment benefits. It requires people to commit to finding work within 3 months of the first payment. It contains a training component. The official policy says that it aims to "reintegrate

people," which means getting them back to work. It was a neoconservative policy with the motto "beyond entitlement." Dubois says that generally, the tendency to replace welfare by workfare has developed in France as in other European countries. The United States has probably gone the farthest of any country in turning welfare into workfare, with strict sanctions that have resulted in millions of people being kicked off welfare.

Another means-tested benefit was the single parent benefit, mainly for single mothers, called Allocation de Parent Isolé (API). During the period of Dubois' study, workers dealt mostly with recipients of RMI and API. Workers generally did their best to give all the benefits that clients were entitled to, but they also had the responsibility of checking whether the client was fulfilling his work requirement for the RMI, and determining whether the API client was cheating and was actually married or getting funds from a man. When the mothers' allowance was first created, motherhood was valued as a means of populating the country. However, when it became a poverty program, motherhood was devalued.

Welfare control has greatly increased in France. The discretionary power of the worker has increased from entitlement to deciding on a case-by-case basis who is "deserving." The workers' previous role of dealing with the collective treatment of clients who received universal benefits changed to promote individualization in dealing with social problems. The 2008 financial crisis has worsened the situation. Family benefits offices have been overwhelmed by the economic crisis and rising unemployment.

In 2004, under the regime of Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the work requirement was enforced more strictly. In 2009 the Revenu de Solidarité Active (RSA) replaced the RMI. The RSA is more workfare-oriented. Dubois claims that his 1995 study is still relevant, as things haven't basically changed. It is hard to believe that the system hasn't changed in 15 years. The RSA had not yet been implemented when Dubois wrote the book, and he doesn't make any prediction about its possible effects. My guess is that things have gotten a lot tougher for clients.

As far as I could tell from the observations that Debois describes, few if any people lost their RMI benefits for not complying with the work requirement, but workers continually nagged them about complying with the requirements. Although the RMI was supposed to reintegrate people into the work force, it sometimes became a barrier to working. One unemployed client who was working part-time was not eligible for benefits. His resources were much less than if he had received RMI and not worked. He complained that this was unjust, that the law did not encourage work. Some workers agreed that there were problems with the legislation.

The cartoon on the front jacket captures the book's main message. It shows 6 people lined up in front of the RMI worker, all but one shabbily dressed, and all of them headless. There are two mice on the floor, one of them headless. The caption is, "Le plus pénible, c'est ce vague sentiment de n´être plus rien!" (The hardest thing is this vague feeling of being nothing.) The welfare bureaucracy creates a feeling of alienation. Even the mice feel alienated. Both workers and clients lose some of their humanity in the transaction between them. Clients are forced to play games in order to get benefits, either becoming docile and passive or protesting aggressively. Workers are in the dominant position of giving or withholding. The press of work rises as unemployment continues to rise, so that clients are not served well and workers burn out.

Workers are responsible for meeting needs, but also enforcing social and institutional order. Workers use "the iron hand and the velvet glove." They give the client the feeling that their personal problems are understood, while at the same time reminding them that they need to adhere to the rules. An undercurrent of tensions is ubiquitous, an inevitable byproduct of the authority of the state. There are long waits, files are lost, computation errors are made, and computer-related

problems are pervasive. Bureaucratic impartiality breaks down in practice. Workers are relatively uncertain of their function. There are tensions between "born and bred French" and "foreigners" (mostly North Africans, Africans, or Turks). There is a lot of prejudice expressed by the "born and bred French." They accuse the "foreigners" of cheating, having many children, and taking benefits unfairly. The poor whites find themselves on the same level as immigrants, with whom they don't want to be associated.

Physical violence happens occasionally but is rare, although there is frequent verbal aggression. One of the offices that Dubois studied was in a larger metropolitan area, where the waiting time was longer and the atmosphere more aggressive. The workers are trained to avoid calling the police, and there were no security guards in the offices that Dubois observed. Recourse to the police is very exceptional. There is one security guard in the Lyon office. This contrasts with the welfare office where I have done outreach in Boston, the Dudley Square Department of Transitional Assistance in Roxbury, a predominantly African-American neighborhood. There are three state police stationed in the office permanently. A client once knocked a worker to the floor. Once when I sat in on an interview and the client raised his voice, a nearby worker alerted a policeman, who lurked outside the cubicle. The client actually posed no threat and he later complained to me about the policeman. I think the ghost of the 1967 black urban rebellion in Boston lingers in the minds of welfare officials. That rebellion began in the Grove Hall welfare office in Roxbury, and sparked rebellions in other cities.

I was surprised at the apparent lack of a formal appeal process in French welfare offices. Aggrieved clients were sometimes told they could complain to the manager. When they did, workers sometimes complained that the manager gave in too easily. One worker said that managers cave in as soon as the recipient yells a little. "All you have to do to get more than the others is to yell a little." Occasionally a client went to the media, and workers often complained that this form of pressure makes the bosses give in too easily.

In Massachusetts, there is a formal appeal process that can result in a fair hearing conducted by an arbiter. I have attended some of these hearings, and they seem to me to be conducted objectively and result as often as not in ruling in favor of the client. There are extensive legal services, many of them devoted exclusively to welfare clients. When I did outreach, I would often call one of their lawyers for advice, and I always advised clients to contact them if they felt they were being treated unfairly.

The best part of the book is the sociological insights that Dubois uses in analyzing interactions between workers and clients, as well as the arrangement of the office and furniture. The desk is the symbol of the authority of the worker. The computer often serves as a screen, a protective device to avoid facing the client. (At the Roxbury DTA, workers look at the computer much more than they look at the client.) Workers sometimes blame mistakes on the computer. During rush periods, workers sometimes take the phone off the hook. (Clients at the Roxbury DTA are often unable to call workers because their voicemail is full.)

As the stable institutions of family and work and socialization opportunities break down, poor people are increasingly isolated and lonely. Some people come to the welfare office "just to talk." Although the workers are not officially social workers, they sometimes take that role.

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