

TOWARDS A CRITICAL POLICY ETHNOGRAPHY THE “UNDESERVING POOR” AND THE NEW WELFARE STATE

Abstract: Policy ethnography approaches provide useful qualitative data that offer a nuanced and realistic ground-level view of policies, too often analyzed abstractly from the top. However, the ambition of these approaches must not be limited to producing more precise information. Fieldwork on the control of welfare recipients in France shows that ethnography, and more specifically direct observation, is particularly suited to uncovering the structural features of the new wave of public policies sweeping through advanced societies in the wake of demise of the Fordist-Keynesian compact. Indeed, among other consequences, the “de-objectivation” of the collective categories built during the process of welfare state development leads to more astringent and intense controls of recipients. These controls are based on loose criteria defined in situated practices and interactions. The ethnographic capture and analysis of the concrete practices of the agents of welfare bureaucracies enable us to track and critique the more abstract transformations of the social state in the age of “workfare.” Such fieldwork provides an illustration of the empirical and theoretical potentials of critical policy ethnography.

Résumé : Les approches en termes de policy ethnography sont utiles pour la collecte d’un matériau qualitatif offrant une vision nuancée et réaliste de politiques qui sont le plus souvent abordées par le haut et de façon parfois assez abstraite. Leur ambition ne doit cependant pas se limiter à la production d’informations plus fines. À partir d’une enquête sur le contrôle des assistés sociaux en France, on verra ainsi que le travail ethnographique de terrain, et en particulier l’observation directe, peuvent s’avérer propices au dévoilement de caractéristiques structurelles de l’intervention publique. En l’occurrence, la désobjectivation des catégories collectives construites à la faveur du développement de l’Etat social conduit notamment à des contrôles sans cesse plus étroits des assistés. Ces contrôles sont fondés sur des critères flous définis en pratique et en situation. La restitution de ces pratiques et situations grâce à l’enquête ethnographique est ainsi appelée par des évolutions d’ensemble dont elle permet en retour l’examen critique. Nos enquêtes sur les transformations du traitement des assistés sociaux illustrent ainsi ce qu’on se propose d’appeler une ethnographie critique des politiques (critical policy ethnography).

Keywords: policy ethnography; critical approach; categories; bureaucracy; social state; control; welfare fraud; unemployment; poverty.

INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years, policy analysis, a field not prone to reflexivity and largely dominated by mainstream or even managerial approaches, has experienced a renewal with the development of less traditional modern techniques and models of analysis (Parsons, 1996; Hodgson and Irving, 2007), such as policy ethnography. This generic term covers highly diverse studies that can roughly be classified in three main currents.

The first trend places itself in a rather conventional perspective of analysis of public policies. Focused on the implementation of public programmes, case studies are seen, within the framework of applied ethnography, as means to identify problems “in the field” and reveal the complexity of human situations. Ethnographic fieldwork must help solve dysfunctions, gain efficiency or reduce the “democratic gap”. Van Willigen and Dewalt (1985) or Schensul (1999), for instance, argue for an ethnography turned towards better management of public policies. In an anti-technocratic yet normative perspective, Stack (1997) advocates policies that better take into account human experiences thanks to ethnography. In the same vein, Stubbs (2002), basing his theory on international transfers of social policy experiences, considers that observing human situations in ethnographic research is a way of making reforms more “democratic”. In a more reflexive way, he also shows how the boundaries between research and consultancy are slowly opening up in what has been called “NGOgraphy”, an emerging field in intercultural contexts. This brings us to the second trend, linked to the tradition of cultural anthropology, that puts a great emphasis on the symbolic aspects of policies, with studies based on speech analysis that tend to reveal cultural myths that are the grounds of policies. This is the case of studies that rely on discourse analysis and tend to reveal the “cultural myths” policies are based on (Shore & Wright, 1997). This also applies, under a different form, to those that place themselves in an interpretative perspective linked with textual ethnography, focused mainly on the meanings in public policies (Yanow, 2000).

I position myself rather in continuation of a third trend. In this body of work, two main premises lead researchers to carry out an in-depth fieldwork in order to analyze the concrete practices through which a policy is enforced in everyday life. These premises are to some extent a break with the traditional vision of public policies. The first consists in positing that subordinate officers in administrations can play a key role in defining a policy. Not only do they implement decisions taken at the top level, but they also make decisions themselves on individual cases. Even though they do not make major decisions, they can always use their discretion in the orientation of their practices and the definition of their attitude. Public policy is *in fine* the sum of these decisions, practices and attitudes. The second premise consists in considering that a policy principally exists through the experience of its recipients. For pupils and parents, the sick or the unemployed, education, health, or employment policies are more significant as places, agents and concrete situations that have tangible effects on their social life than as laws and budgets. These two premises naturally draw attention to street-level bureaucracy, as in the eponymous and now famous book by Michael Lipsky (Lipsky, 1980). They also draw attention to the direct relationships with the audience targeted, which are crucial in certain fields of public action such as health, education (Smyth and Shacklock, 1998), and social policies which are the subject of numerous studies. I will focus on social policies.

Among the studies on the implementation of welfare reforms that were published from the mid-1990s onwards, several involve ethnographic work in a manner that is similar to what I would like to do here. These studies are too many to mention - on the American case, Morgen & Makovsky’s stimulating review is my main source (2003). I will only highlight some major contributions of ethnographic analysis of social policies subject to reform without

discussing the details of their underlying frames of analysis. Welfare ethnography, which gives an insight into the real situations of the poor, allowed for a break with government and media rhetorics. “Ethnographers have deconstructed the hegemonic discourse on welfare restructuring, juxtaposing dominant ideologies with the so-called realities of impoverishment” (Morgen & Maskovsky, 2003: 325). This is also a decisive contribution to the scientific debate that allows us to go beyond the hegemonic behaviourist approaches, known to be related to repressive policies towards the poor (Wacquant, 2008). Field research has also revealed the often tragic consequences of reforms and shed a light on the resulting deterioration of living standards, as in the case of isolated mothers (Edin & Stein, 1997; Hays, 2002). This is a major contribution to the debate on evaluating the effects of reforms (Lichter & Jayakody, 2002). Such research has also revealed the contradictions welfare workers face. They have more decision-making power but are under pressure for more efficiency, and must handle tougher situations with reduced means (Morgen, 200; Evans & Harris, 2004).

These are major contributions to a scientific knowledge of contemporary forms of poverty and the way it is treated. They are also useful as antidotes to the mix of common sense, ideology and bureaucratic expertise that so often dominates the public debate on welfare. “Ethnographers, claiming access to insight overlooked in the largely quantitative research of policy science, have produced findings to intervene strategically in the policy debate with a variety of objectives: to humanize welfare recipients and to deconstruct, complicate, and contest the ideologically saturated policy discussions of welfare” (Morgen & Maskovsky, 2003: 323)¹. In this sense, these analyses of welfare reform provide us with a public ethnography, insofar as they lead researchers to study a core question in contemporary societies that has been fiercely debated, and bring this object out of the academic field. “Anthropology has not ignored the policy debates, but anthropologists have refused to analyze welfare ‘reform’ on the narrow terms set by the policy elite.” I will add that in the current context the scientific scope and social usefulness of such research only reach their full extent in a critical perspective that tends to deconstruct prevailing categories of understanding and reveal the relations of domination that structure the situations observed². The combination of these elements in a research that focuses not on a social group *per se* (the poor in the present case) but on practices and the balance of power inherent to its legitimized political treatment creates what I would call “critical policy ethnography”. I will give an example of this approach with the bureaucratic control of the poor³ in France. The specifics of the French case and my own research orientations will draw attention to points that complement others already mentioned on the American case.

In France, as in other western European countries, but unlike in the USA (Skocpol, 1992), the formation of a universal and redistributive welfare state was accompanied by a progressive, though never complete, shift from public charity distributed on the basis of a judgement on the characteristics of applicants, to social rights granted on the basis of an established status. Pension, sickness and unemployment payments are in this logic the counterpart of contributions paid by workers, which give them entitlement to these benefits. The recognition of such statutes implies that law categories guarantee public protection

¹ On an empirical different, but as he shows with the US case, structurally close field, read Loïc Wacquant’s remarks on the importance of an ethnography of the carceral system for a critical analysis of penal policies (Wacquant, 2002).

² For a first introduction to critical ethnography, see Thomas, 1993.

³ Using Georg Simmel’s definition of the poor through the collective attitude that constitutes them as potential welfare recipients

against a risk seen as collective (as with the unemployment category: see Salais *et. al.*, 1986). These collective categories are today deeply questioned, with the changes of socioeconomic conditions and social policies (on unemployment, see also Gautié, 2002). This “de-objectivation” of collective categories constructed during the process of welfare state development leads to a new logic of public charity that attributes grants not because of an established right but according to an evaluation of individual situations. This leads to ever-stricter individual controls of welfare recipients. These controls are based on vague criteria that are defined according to practice and individual situations. It is thus necessary to describe these practices and situations with ethnographic field work which allows us to make a critical examination of general evolutions. Ethnographic observation of basic bureaucratic work and relationships not only gives us a better understanding of the realities of public intervention, but it is also a powerful way of revealing its structural characteristics and current transformations.

The following proposals come from two original studies that jointly dealt with the elaboration of control policies and their implementation at the local level. We will focus on the latter part - the field will be local administrations in charge of controls: 10 local agencies in charge of the RMI⁴, one of the main benefits in France paid to adults over 25, and of the lone parent benefit for single mothers, and three local agencies of the Ministry of Employment in charge with controlling the unemployed⁵. This ethnographic fieldwork was carried out over several weeks. They consisted not only in a series of interviews but also in direct observation of interactions during controls (home investigation of benefit recipients and interviews with jobseekers), using a method already used in a previous research on the bureaucratic treatment of the poor (Dubois, 2003). The point of this article is more about stating an approach rather than presenting the results of a study. The data will be presented mostly through vignettes.

THE POOR AND THE NEW SOCIAL STATE

Before describing bureaucratic practices of controls, let us recall their context. Individualization and responsabilization are now the keywords of social policies. They sum up rather well the many changes in the relationship between the social state and its “users” that happened in western Europe with the partly performative announcement of the “crisis of the welfare state” in the mid-1970s, and even more with the reforms of the mid-1990s that subordinate more than ever social welfare to the imperatives of higher economic growth and employment rate. Control practices are part of this general evolution, as can be seen in the public structures that primarily affect the most fragilized tier of the lower classes (social benefits, guaranteed income, unemployment benefits).

As a self-proclaimed principle, the individualization of social problems is part of the phenomenon of invention or reinvention of institutional technologies of treatment of the poor. This individualization is underpinned by a social philosophy that states the necessity of placing “the individual”, “their needs” or “aspirations”, at the heart of “new social policies”. It is politically promoted through the criticism of the “traditional” welfare state, said to be blind to individual particularities, and it is technically justified by increasingly complex family or employment situations that render useless the application of standard categories. Individualization takes several forms. Contractualization leads to the end of entitlement, as

⁴ *Revenu Minimum d'Insertion*.

⁵ For an overview of the conditions of provision of social welfare in France today, with a special focus on the RMI, see Murard, 2002.

individuals no longer have a status but are contracting individuals whose personal involvement is required. This goes with an injunction to draw up a “project” (a professional, training or insertion project, etc.) that tends to take what is institutionally possible and desirable as personal desires (see Mauger, 2001; Zunigo. 2007). On top of these procedures and systems, there are administrative practices such as “personal monitoring” of jobseekers or “follow-up” of “integration projects”. Such practices do undoubtedly bring support to the people concerned, but they also imply more intense institutional constraints, especially for those who do not fit within the social norms this constraint conveys, such as “unhirable” long-term jobseekers or lone mothers whose only prospect is their monthly allowance.

This tendency towards individualization is combined with another trend: the “responsibilization” of the poor. Yet again, there are two sides to this trend, very much linked to one another, despite their divergent political implications. There is an injunction to responsibility (take care of yourself, be independent, do not expect everything from the state, etc.), but there is also a denunciation of the individual responsibilities of the poor, such as their lack of will, laziness, negligence or even dishonesty. Now the oldest moralizing discourses (Wacquant, 2008) go together with technicist demonstrations by econometricians who advocate the “rational choice” and neo-classical labour economy (Cordonnier, 2000). Beyond representations, the tools of individual responsibility such as contracts or personal monitoring are also in practice the tools of coercion (for instance, the breach-of-contract penalty, benefits cut off for not attending monitoring sessions, or the obligation to accept certain job offers).

The stress on ever-closer individualization combined with suspicion on the responsibility (in the sense of guilt) of the poor, now systematically portrayed in the media as “cheats” has recently led to the implementation of stricter, more visible and systematic control policies. Since the mid 1990s, there has been a trend of increasing controls everywhere in Europe. Initiated in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, the implementation or the enhancement of control technologies (data file cross-checking, summons, home investigations) and of a set of laws that tighten requirements for recipients and create more penalties (benefits cut-off, the obligation to accept insecure jobs) have spread to other European countries (Belgium, Germany, Spain, Italy, and France in particular). If these countries have tightened controls, it is because the balance of power between employers and employees and the socio-political balance of power that shapes social policies have created the conditions for a shift towards austerity in the treatment of poverty.

We insist on the fact that this new balance of power, which is particularly unfavourable to the poor, is accompanied by a transformation that greatly affects both the objective conditions of social and job insecurity and the institutional and mental categories that help understand it. Thus the “de-objectivation” of collective categories of social problems and pauperized populations has greatly contributed to “justify” controls as a means to define situations and the possibilities of public assistance related to them at the official level. The increasingly blurred distinction between employment and unemployment has created a wider range of more insecure situations, and as a consequence statuses have become more insecure too. It is now extremely hard to determine who is really unemployed, therefore there is more suspicion towards those who claim to be unemployed, and more controls on their individual situations. The same could be said about welfare payments, meant to deal with increasingly unstable situations (in terms of family structure, for instance). They are now increasingly granted on case-by-case individual assessments, more than on the basis of stable categories of entitled recipients.

After this short overview, two propositions can be made. First, the deep changes that affect the social state in Europe, especially in its relationships with the pauperized tier of the working class, consist partly in a fragmentation of the social question, which is now dealt

with in individual interactions and on a case-by-case basis (Dubois, 2003; 2005). The ethnographic approach, particularly the direct observations of interactions, is thus an appropriate method for the description of a structural feature of the treatment of the poor today – not unlike the way Erving Goffman used this method to describe the social atomization characteristic of mental institutions (Goffman, 1968). The second proposition consists in considering the increasing controls on recipients as a telling sign of these general transformations. The combination of the two propositions makes ethnographic observation of control practices particularly useful to the critical analysis of current social policies and shows the contribution of a critical ethnography of policies.

FROM POLITICAL SLOGANS TO BUREAUCRATIC PRACTICES

Control policies lead to very diverse practices. They can be diffuse, as controls are actually carried out at every stage of file treatment, from checking the first form filled to asking for complementary documents and the most insignificant conversations with a cashier, adviser or social worker. They are applied from a distance, either in the traditional way of asking for written proof or, increasingly, with exchange of computer data. I will focus here on face-to-face interviews expressly organized as means to carry out controls. These interviews are not a new phenomenon. Check summons and home investigations have long been part of the history of social services. But we will see how the above-mentioned changes give a new meaning to these traditional practices, in their application as well as in the role they play. But we must first talk about two characteristic elements of the new governance of the poor revealed by the ethnographic observation of control practices: the vague aspect of the institutional categories used to treat the poor and the great variety of practices in this field.

Soft notions, hard decisions

“My method is not to sunder the hard from the soft, but to see the hardness of the soft.”
(Wittgenstein, 1984: 78)

At first sight there is a stark contradiction between, on the one hand, politicians calling for tougher attitudes in the enforcement of rules and on the other hand, the vagueness of the categories applied in controls. This contradiction cannot be reduced to the traditional opposition between law in books and law in action, insofar as law categories are in this case only defined when applied in bureaucratic interactions of controls, as a way to institutionally qualify individual situations. They have nonetheless heavy consequences for the people they target. This is how the abstractions of politico-institutional discourse are materialized, and the power of new social state over the poor is wielded. The relationships of socio-economic domination are reproduced on the stages of “micro-power” (Foucault, 1975), where preferential treatment and arrangements (Bourdieu, 1990) lead to reinforce economic dependence with a dependence on the goodwill of street-level bureaucrats.

Among the multiple bureaucratic categories mobilized for providing benefits, two are at the heart of control practices. Both are very vaguely defined. The first category is isolation. It is used for granting benefits such as the lone parent benefit or the RMI. Despite a legal precedent and many attempts at defining this notion precisely, there is no stable definition of “isolation”. Welfare inspectors have to find their own definition. If a woman says she raises her children alone even though a man regularly visits her, is she still an “isolated” person? It depends on the bonds that exist between the man and the children, defined according to his official position as father but also according to the judgement of public authorities on the

nature of family relationships. It will also depend on a wide range of often subjective elements, and the combination of these elements is left to the inspectors' judgement.

The same happens with money contributions. A joint bank account will be seen as proof of the existence of a couple relationship, as well as contributing to the rent or regularly buying food. However, the occasional purchase of clothes items or toys for the children will be considered as the sign of a "normal" fatherly relationship, but not a couple relationship. The regularity of visits is also one of the criteria used and left to the inspectors' discretion. How regular should the visits be for someone not to be "isolated"? Is one still isolated if one receives weekly visits, while a father in a "normal" household with a travelling job is sometimes no more present than this? Conversely, what are the criteria used to determine that two people living under the same roof are isolated? They are more likely to be regarded as isolated if they are two people of the same gender, or rather old people, or if financial contributions are clearly shared and there are two separate bedrooms (and not just a sofa in the living-room, as often happens in temporary arrangements among the poor). In short, isolation can only be defined in real-life situations, i.e. in home investigations of recipients suspected of not being "really" isolated. Official recognition of isolation is not so much the result of the implementation of a bureaucratic norm as the consequence of a translation into law language of social work of qualification in which juridically classified criteria are only minor elements, and the investigators' schemes of social and moral perception, the habits acquired in the exercise of their profession and the logics inherent to the investigation situation have a considerable weight. Only direct observation is adapted in order to account for this qualification work.

This can be seen in the following excerpt. While the information collected in the investigation should logically lead to the conclusion of a marital cohabitation, the investigator does not question the isolation situation that has been registered. He justifies this magnanimous decision not on the substance of the matter (is this person "really" isolated?) but on the basis of arguments related to his own perception, principles and capacity of action. The first argument defines the situation not as a lie but as a necessary arrangement between two destitute people. The second is moral. His benevolent decision is supposed to help create "a truthful approach". The third is pragmatic. How could he prove before the law the fact that the individual concerned is not "isolated"?

On January 22, 2002, the round begins with an interview with a married woman who claims to live alone. She is an RMI recipient. Her previous landlady had asked that her benefits be directly paid to her and not to those people she described as a couple. There is thus the presumption of a marital cohabitation. The man and his wife have already been subject to controls and are known as "misfits". When he arrives, the investigator looks at the mailbox. It has two names on it, hers and her husband's. He asks the neighbour who comes home at the same time if the recipient lives there and whether "Guy is here". (The husband's name is Guy. The investigator explains that acting as if he is a regular visitor of the recipient is one of the small tricks of the trade). He rings the doorbell. She is home, as well as her son (from her first marriage), her husband and workers repairing the boiler. The recipient invites the investigator and me to take a seat in her kitchen. The house is very small, with scarce furniture. The woman has the status of industrially disabled person.

Investigator: You know who I am, but let me introduce myself anyway. I'm a CAF investigator [the CAF is the body that deals out family benefits in France]. The CAF asked me to check if your situation fits with your statements.

I am a sworn official from the DRASS [the regional bureau for sanitary and social affairs, which represents the state in these matters] and I have at my disposal some information that will be recorded in the control report that I will submit to my superiors.

Woman: I know.

Investigator: If I realize that your statements correspond with reality there will be no problem. But if

they don't, the CAF will claim refund.

Woman: I know.

Investigator: I also wanted to tell you that I might ask questions that seem indiscreet...

Woman: I'm used to that...

Investigator: ... but these questions are related to the benefits you receive. [Pause]. So, let me sum up your situation: You have two children, you receive ASF [a family benefit granted when one of the parents cannot provide for his family], AAH [a benefit for disabled adults], and housing benefits. [He turns towards the husband] Sir, I would like you to explain to me what your situation is.

Husband: One day I'm here, the next I'm away, I'm everywhere.

Investigator: Do you live here?

Husband: No, I live in the flat above. I come here to eat, but I pay for the meal.

Investigator: And yet I see you've just had your name added on the mailbox.

Husband: It's because there's just one mailbox, so she takes my mail for me.

Investigator: You tell me you live above, but I come here and you're here.

Husband: I'm just popping in.

Investigator: [interrupting]. So you do live under the same roof?

Woman: My husband and I, we broke up. He was violent. He drank. I asked for a divorce but it's a long procedure and there's too many forms to fill in, but my husband didn't want to do it...He still doesn't so it's just been dragging on, and now I'm fed up with it.

Investigator: Are you considering starting to live together again?

Woman: Not right now...I put him to the test for his drinking problem. Now we've got a good relationship, he pops in now and then, we share our meals but we're not going to get back together.

Husband: I'm independent-minded and I need the flat above. It's something I can lean on if I'm unemployed and I'm on probation anyway...If they send you to jail they don't let you out so easily if you don't have some place to live...

Investigator: Yes but the CAF pays a flat for you and you don't actually live in it. You're entitled to the housing benefit only if you really live in your flat. Do you have any written proof?

Husband: I have a lease.

Investigator: Yes, but a lease doesn't prove anything, don't you have power or water bills?

Husband: I take power from the automatic light switch.

Investigator: So you have no written proof? [Silence]. When were you imprisoned?

Husband: I came out four months ago. I'm doing lessons up there [at the prison] because I drive without a license. But I don't need a driving license...

Investigator: Do you receive unemployment benefits?

Husband: Yes. 2,600 Francs a month approximately 300 euros). I also have a small inheritance because my mother died.

Investigator: Oh, I didn't know...

Husband: My sister gives it to me bit by bit, because she doesn't want me to drink.

Investigator: Okay, my problem is, how do I prove that you really live in your flat...[the investigator asks to visit the flat upstairs. He makes an inventory: a bare mattress, four armchairs, a few items of clothing. He says after the inspection]: So you're not together?

Woman: We are not getting back together for personal reasons, because my husband has been such an idiot...Plus I have my kids, they were in a foster family a short time ago...

Investigator: And does the father pay a pension?

Woman: No, he pays nothing, he's been pissing me off for four years and I don't mind telling it in front of the kid. He's just playing with the kids...I can show you written proof.

Investigator: If he ever changes his mind don't forget to tell the CAF that he pays a pension to you... [Takes notes, and says]: I'm going to tell you what the problem is. It's about marital life. Your situation that you explained, I can understand it, but from an outsider's point of view, it's not that clear...

Woman: What do you mean, not that clear?

Investigator: Well, we could think that you live together. All I'm asking is if you start living together again, you tell us...

Woman: Sure, I'll be honest and tell you.

Investigator: If there is a positive evolution, you tell us. We don't forbid anything, we just want to understand, it's about the law, you know. [Silence]. Do you have any questions? [Not waiting for the answer]. Well we'll have to settle this flat problem. [He hands the recipient the letter sent to the CAF by the woman's previous landlady. Appended is a letter allegedly sent by the recipient demanding direct payment of benefits on her personal account and not on the landlady's account]. Did you send this letter?

Woman: No. That woman's a real pain in the ass.

Investigator: So it seems you've had a dispute with your landlady. Why?

Woman: In the beginning it was all right. Then she had money problems and she asked me if I could leave. For me it was like throwing me out. [Pause]. But I'll be honest, I'm summoned to the court 'cause I kicked her ass. She was really harassing me, so I punched her...[Pause]. She says I live with my husband but I don't.

Investigator: Well, I'm going to have you make a statement that says you didn't write the letter. Anyway you already have an ongoing procedure. And as you don't live there anymore, it doesn't matter.

Woman: [she goes on with what she was saying] There's a difference between coming to see me and living with me. My kids can testify.

Investigator: This is no matter of theirs.

Woman: Kids above 14 do testify to the police! [She goes on explaining].

Investigator: Yes but enough of that now. Fill in the form please.

Woman: I've done nothing wrong, honest!

Investigator: The landlady wrote to us "The husband and the wife live at the same place". That's a bit suspicious, isn't it?

Woman: Yes, of course, you're right...

Investigator: So your statement is: "I live alone with my two children. I did not write the letter dated November 5, 2001. There is actually a dispute between me and my previous landlady Ms X, hence my decision to leave my previous flat". Write down the date and sign. [Hands the document he wrote]. Have you had a social investigation before?

Woman: Yes. It was required by the judge, but as she saw it was all right between my kids and me...Well I could have them back. [The documents reveal that her children had previously been taken away from her by the DDASS because she was considered violent; she had destroyed the windshield of the children's father with an axe.]

Investigator: Well you'd better stay like this then. There's kind of a moral contract between you and the judge about your kids...

When he comes out, the investigator says: "the husband is a misfit. He's been in the same kind of relationship before, it worked in the same way. This is what I call two poverties living together." He goes on explaining that the husband is an alcoholic who has a conflictive relationship with his wife. He favours his network of friends and drinking mates and is "completely fending for himself. If we had insisted a bit more, he would have told us what kind of traffic he is into!". The investigator opts for doing nothing. "In that sort of case, there's no solution. How can we prove he doesn't live there? And from a financial point of view, it doesn't really matter for the CAF since he's going to start working, his housing benefit is going to be cut off...That's his way of life. He was one of my first cases as an investigator when he was homeless. It's hard to deal quickly with a case like this. You have to leave it time, and a right to reply. At some point I tried to catch him, telling him his name was on the mailbox and that he lived there. I wanted to check the flat and see if it was inhabited. But I was careful not to ask anything, so if he says anything, he's being truthful."

Similar remarks could be made about the main criteria used in controls on the unemployed, now called jobseekers. This criterion is "active job-seeking". The establishment of this criterion, which dates back to 1979, is the sign of a shift from the official recognition of the status of the unemployed from an objective perspective (being jobless) to the adoption of individual attitude as the criterion that determines whether one "really" is unemployed (is the unemployed person really looking for a job?). Then again, even if it is a notion written down in labour laws, no one really knows what "actively seeking employment" means. According to the laws in force, this notion must be defined with respect to individual characteristics and the local situation of employment. This amounts to saying: with respect to what the social logics of bureaucracy and control interactions determine as the official description of an individual case. Is it enough to control job offers? If it is, how often should it be done? What proof of it can there be? Is it required to send unsolicited application letters in

order to be considered an active jobseeker? If so, how many? And how do we define an application as “serious”? Even if there are fixed criteria in this field, they are not really applied in practice. The application of these criteria depends on so many parameters that they lose all their meaning. They can only be appreciated with respect to the situation of the labour market, the kind of job one is looking for, the sector, the time of the year, and to characteristics of the unemployed individual, their transportation opportunities, health, family situation, age, education, previous experience and “career” as a jobseeker... Again, relating these diverse criteria to one another in the process of bureaucratic judgement can lead to many different results. Mr X is actively looking for employment, but is he a “genuine” jobseeker and does he then deserve the benefits granted only to those “genuine” jobseekers? The answer to these questions is only indirectly linked with objective considerations that respond to formal criteria. It is much more directly linked with the social logics of the investigators’ relationships with their position, their role in administration, the practical logics of their profession and of control interactions. As in the case of isolation, only ethnographic research can help in grasping the meaning and the use of the notion of “active job search” that is the basis of unemployment benefits and of the debates on the treatment of the unemployed.

On February 17, 2005, at 2:15 P.M., Mr S. is summoned to the job-seeking controlling service of the regional employment agency, a local state service. Investigator T. receives him half an hour late. He has already examined the case which he sees as suspicious. It is about a jobseeker from Sri Lanka who says he is waiting to buy a new taxi phone. Benefits services expressed “doubts over his will to look for employment”. T., usually wearing a jumper, has put on a jacket and a shirt. There’s a control interview today. He feels it’s going to be complicated and seems quite nervous. Before letting S. in, he warms up, like an athlete, and he heartens himself: “Come on, T., you’re on the field now!” S., whose French is rather bad, is accompanied by a man around the same age, his interpreter, also from Sri Lanka. The latter, A., does not speak fluent French either. Both keep their rather worn jackets on. They brought all their documents in a brown paper envelope. It is mostly A. that speaks. The interview starts in a very formal way. T. has to fill in the sections of an information form. He tries to make things more comfortable in what appears to be an interrogation: “I’m just going to ask you a few questions, OK?”. We talk about S.’s curriculum. T. is surprised that he was once a chemist. A. tells him that being a chemist in Sri Lanka is not the same as in France. T. asks for an explanation about S. being made redundant after more than ten years in a food factory as machine cleaner. “What happened? You call tell me everything!” he says in a light tone. S. and A. explain that it is due to an industrial accident. They show written proof of it. A discussion follows about the nature of his invalidity, and T. gives advice on how S. can get a redundancy pension from his employer. He and A. don’t seem to understand. They talk about several procedures to follow, and after 15 minutes T. starts checking the documents related to his job search. S. takes letters of refusal out of an envelope. T. looks at the stamps, asks where the companies are located, and expresses doubts on the refusals. All the letters are written in the same manner, and lack precision. “Are the bosses of the companies friends of yours?”, he asks with a smile. After S. tells him that they are, he says, as much to the observer as to S., and looking amused: “You shouldn’t have told me!”. ‘Okay, I’ll write it: four letters, but “the jobseeker admits he knows the employers...”. Then they go on to the project of setting up a business. A. says S. has found a business office that he’s going to buy tomorrow, after six months of negotiation with the landlord. T. then asks questions, whose point is mainly to ensure the project is real. The questions are about financing, what exactly the company does, where it will operate, whether he knows (and he does not know) about the aid systems for creating a business. He writes all the information he received and says he has doubts on the seriousness of the steps taken. 3:05 P.M: T. has a new tone; he speaks in a deep voice when he presents his conclusions and rebukes S. “I have to tell you one thing: four applications in one year, it’s not much! It should be four a month. And we don’t really know if these applications are genuine.” Then he reminds him of the duties of jobseekers: to actively and regularly look for a job, be available...A. tries to change the subject, saying it would be proper that S., who’s been paying taxes for 12 years while having a job, should receive a pension for one year. He implies he’s being controlled and threatened with a penalty just because he’s a foreigner. T. immediately answers: “No, it’s not about that. Actually, you have no proof you’ve been looking for a job. Your case isn’t good, you didn’t do what you ought to. [He shows the files]: I can see it, there’s nothing! It also means the ANPE [the French employment agency] didn’t send you any offer. You see, I see the two sides of the problem. Have you ever been to the ANPE?” T. reminds him he has to go there regularly, check job offers, and record his visit on a computer. S. didn’t know that. T. now gives advice as well as blame. He lectures him: “I’m going to write to the Assedic [the public body in charge of paying unemployment benefits], because they’re not happy at all about you!”. S. and A.

grin like children caught in the act. “I’ll give you some advice: if you’ve gone that far into setting up a company, you have to be quick. It has to be over before summer.” They try to put up a brave face. A. translates: “It will be done in one month.” “I don’t work, and neither does my wife”, says S. with a regretful tone, showing his will to go back to work.

After they leave, T. comments for my sake. He says on a light tone: “I’m so mean! I will do everything! I’m pretending to be nice to get them to say something... But this guy’s done nothing to look for a job. That’s for sure.” While he made it look as if he was on the recipient’s side in the interview, he is actually convinced that the latter was not actively seeking employment. However he does hesitate now that he has to write down his conclusions in the file. Eventually, he opts against stating a lack of job search and calls for nothing more than a warning, that can lead to a penalty. “And I’m being nice...If I followed the rules, he should have his benefits cut.” This rather accommodating solution has more to do with arbitration between opposite orientations than the investigator’s kindness. His superiors want him to be more flexible, and he does not want to risk disapproval by calling for too harsh a penalty that might be commuted by the hierarchy or even lead to an appeal from S. But he also wants to take into account the paying body (the Assedic), which initiated the control procedure and expects a proper answer. “I can’t be on bad terms with them. We can’t always do as they tell us. That’s why this compromise with a warning is a good solution. It shows we took what they said into account.” By not asking for the harshest penalty, investigators show their hierarchy that they have a free judgement. For T., the result of the interview goes beyond the decision taken. The practice of checking is in itself efficient, because it is a way of warning, in a manner that combines (faked) empathy with disguised threats, and helps to make recipients understand obeying institutional orders is in their own interest.

We can see that this survey not only provides policy analysis with more precise and nuanced information, but is a key tool in shedding light on the fundamental contradictions of this policy. The same can be said about another characteristic of recipient control beyond the new social administration, i.e. the great discrepancy between individual practices.

Individual variations in bureaucratic practices

Investigators have a position that induces a firm attitude with respect to the law that is quite hard to hold in their professional practices, which vary according to the body they work for. This relationship with the law can be analyzed as a form of “juridical insecurity”, not in the sense law specialists use to describe to consequences of the “flaws”, “voids” or “contradictions” of law, but in the sociological acceptance, inspired by the notion of linguistic insecurity elaborated by William Labov (Labov, 1966). Let us recall that linguistic insecurity corresponds with the situation of agents who, because of their social position and trajectory (newly rising lower middle class, clashing with higher classes) have a strong belief in norm (“linguistic hypersensitivity”), while being unable to fully conform to it. Their language flaws observed in their interactions with those that embody norm remind them painfully of the limits of hypercorrection, towards which they strive.

Investigators are also induced to have a strong belief in norm, in this case in juridical norm. This can be due to their origins and social position, but it is mostly related to their position in the institution they work for, and more generally, to the fact that their relationships with various categories of agents (their superiors and other CAF agents, those from other bodies and the recipients they control) lead them to define their role according to a rigid conception of law. This juridism of position that they try to put in practice rigidly induces them to condemn any fault (hypersensitivity). Their tendency towards juridical “hypercorrection” clashes with the hurdles that prevent them from fulfilling their dream of

juridical perfection, to which juridical hypercorrection is logically linked. These hurdles are the limits of a mainly practical training in law, the complexity and the frequent modifications of the rules to enforce, the instability and the very substance of the social situations they have to deal with.

There are many responses to juridical insecurity, and they vary mainly according to the relationships of investigators to their institution, which depends on their career paths⁶. This is the first principle of differentiation of investigator practices. Let us examine the case of CAF investigators. They can be low-rank employees who have always worked within the institution, and for whom the job of investigator is an end-of-career promotion, or investigators for many years, self-taught and disillusioned about an activity they feel wears them out, or young graduates for whom the position is only transitory, or medium-rank employees who became investigators because they could not get a higher position. They inevitably have very diverging relationships to their position, which cannot be systematically analyzed here. Let us remark that those who owe their institution everything and the new employees whose beliefs have not been shaken have a tendency towards a self-oblivious juridical hypercorrection. Unsuccessful employees, however, who see themselves as incompetent regarding the law, so much so that they prefer to follow the spirit rather than the letter of the law, like “old” investigators, known as lonesome “cow-boys” who have “seen it all” and proclaim the superiority of their “field” work over the finicky ways of “the office”, shamelessly allow themselves to step out of line, sometimes in the name of the law. But to be precise, one should make a distinction between the laws ruling the payment of benefits, the enforcement of which is the object of controls (with all the above-mentioned nuances), and the evolving conformation to the laws ruling control practices. An arrangement with the second category can lead to more rigour in the way the first is enforced.

Beside the first principle of variation, which leads to a rather hypocritical formalism or more or less accepted arrangements, there is the social distance between investigators and recipients, which tends to lead to “understanding” towards “the poor people” who “try to take care of themselves” or coercion towards “cheats” who “take advantage of the system at the expense of others”. Again, we can only briefly mention the factors that lead to the first or second opinion. Direct contact with extreme poverty and social tragedies induces attitudes that vary according to personal preferences (especially political and religious) and previous experience of unemployment situations, whether personal experience or a relative’s. Similarly, contact with ways of life seen as “deviant” (alcoholism, high marital instability, nomadism, etc.) or “strange” because foreign (large African and North African families, the *communautarisme* Turks and Asians are supposedly guilty of) induces attitudes and professional practices which are all the more based on personal tendencies – as much linked to personal social history as professional practices – that these ways of life are precisely very hard to define in the sole prism of the institutional vision.

Beyond these differentiations between individuals, there are also local differences. Recipient control varies to a great extent according to local habits of the areas investigators stem from. These local habits have an influence on different “styles” of controls, in phase with the characteristics of agency directors and their relationships with local political and judicial authorities. In the same way, strict controls on the unemployed are partly determined by localized relationships between institutions, between the local representative of the Ministry of Work (DDT - departemental direction of work) and those of employment bodies (ANPE) and benefit payment bodies (ASSEDIC), as well as by the local political situation and the balance of power between trade unions and company leaders. And we must also

⁶ In the sense of the succession of objective positions and points of view on these positions defined among others by Everett C. Hughes. See for instance Hughes, 1937.

mention relationships within institutions which, with the combined effects of personal tendencies, local traditions and relationships to other institutions, can lead us to define controls as a “dirty job” that has to be done (in one of the places surveyed, the controls service was often referred to as “the Gestapo”), or on the contrary as a necessary and accepted activity in which everyone must be involved.

This can only be understood with a prolonged ethnographic research which combines continuous presence and interviews with investigators, observation of practices and visits in various services. It is in these multiple interactions that the practical reality of the governance of the poor is determined. Ethnographic investigation sheds a light on two trends characteristic of the way the modern social state works. The first trend, which has just been highlighted, is related to the increasing diversification of local situations and bureaucratic practices, a long way from the traditional and especially French pattern of a strong centralised state that imposes homogeneous policies on the whole territory. The second trend is linked with the crucial role given to initiative or at least appreciation in the lower level, within a framework of delegated responsibilities, from the Ministry and national bodies to local directions, from local directions to the local staff who interact with the public. This is a very visible phenomenon regarding controls, which are the object of many political debates as well as a hot potato for those who must carry them out. It is also a socially visible phenomenon in a situation where governments have never been so fond of shock announcements and other tricks of “symbolic politics” (Edelman, 1985), and agents on the field have never had so much trouble coping with their consequences with limited means. In that light, the ethnographic approach contributes to the critical analysis of public policies.

REVEALING THE HETEROGENEOUS LOGICS OF A PATERNALISTIC AND PUNITIVE SOCIAL STATE

Critical approaches of the transformations of the social state often highlight, and rightly so, ideological factors (the triumph of neo-liberal standards, coupled with the success of law-and-order ideology), and general socioeconomic balances of power (increased job insecurity and the joint attack of the corporate sphere on labour law and social welfare). Regarding controls, one can also see in them one of the signs of “the age of surveillance”, ever-tighter controls of the behaviour and situations of the poor on top of biometric identity check techniques, CCTV and computerized data, in the renewed arsenal of power technologies (Lyon, 2001).

Our aim is to show that, far from betraying this critical perspective, an approach focusing on practices, supported by ethnographic fieldwork, can contribute to it, by providing examples and showing the heterogeneous logics and the sometimes contradictory processes through which phenomena such as the shift towards coercion of social policy occur.

Differentiations within the social state

The social state is no more a homogeneous entity with a unified “will” than the state in general. This self-evident fact, sometimes buried in generalizing perspectives, takes us to relevant issues made very visible by our investigations on the field on how controls are carried out. Among other things, these investigations allow us to posit the hypothesis of an increasing disjunction between what Bourdieu calls the left hand and the right hand of the social state (Bourdieu, 1999).

The right hand, i.e. top civil servants and technocratic decision-makers from the central state administration, think and act according to the common political sense now

prevailing, which is hostile to the “traditional” social state and tends to consider benefits as counter-productive. This “common sense” discourse which supposedly “says out loud” what everyone should know (that many recipients cheat, many unemployed people do not actively seek jobs, and the whole system makes it more beneficial not to work, etc.) also refers to science (economics) and figures, and ends up producing a completely abstract vision of social problems.

The left hand of the social state (i.e. administration employees and in the current case investigators in contact with the poor and the unemployed) is imbued with the dominating discourse as well as faced with experiences which to a great extent contradict it. The contradictions between the official point of view and the situations experienced, the policies to be enforced and the practical conditions of their enforcement, even more than the sensation of being worn out after too much contact with poverty, are the cause of a social suffering that is probably more intense than ever. And to see the extent of the phenomenon, one needs the practical knowledge provided by ethnographic investigation. This is what happened with employment advisers in the ANPE. They had to organize a monthly follow-up (recipients were summoned more frequently) that was decided by the Prime Minister Dominique de Villepin in 2005. The decision entailed that there were many more visits in employment agencies, with no new advisers being hired, which led to shorter interviews. The decision was also coupled with threats of new penalties for recipients, and the number of recipients having their benefits cut off for not turning up at the interview rose spectacularly, so much that it became one of the main causes for being struck off official unemployment data⁷. “Counselling interviews” have actually become control interrogations, in which counsellors reluctantly become investigators. They have to play an absurd comedy: they must make sure recipients are actively looking for jobs even when there are no jobs and that they do not refuse jobs when the offers are not forthcoming, while recipients are expected to “play the game”. Nothing is more efficient in unveiling social hypocrisy towards unemployment than these scenes played behind the closed doors of street-level bureaucracy. The same could be said about CAF investigators, who have no other choice but to end up processing files under the orders of a bossy superior, or to become “the cops of the poor”. We could also mention work inspectors, trained to protect workers’ rights, who end up giving penalties to the unemployed, as an administrative punishment.

Ethnographic investigation allows us not only to understand these awkward situations and the suffering they cause, but also to realize how the logics of control implementation is closely linked to how low-rank civil servants cope with the contradictions they are faced with because of the current socioeconomic and political conditions of the treatment of the poor. On the one hand, control policy causes suffering and resentment in low-rank state agents, which shape their practices. Control policy provokes more precisely role conflicts, which are dealt with differently according to one’s personal tendencies and the local situation. On the other hand, while these contradictions can be lived as an inner conflict and personal dilemma (Lipsky, 1980), they are actually much more closely related to the socio-political contradictions of today’s social state and the two faces it presents to the poor: necessary relief as well as a coercion threat.

The shift of the social state towards austerity is related to heterogeneous causal series: those already mentioned of structural evolutions affecting the production of social policies and the balance of power involved in their elaboration; and also those of practical logics of

⁷ In December 2007, 22,1% of removals from the list of job seekers correspond to the declaration of a new job – 41,5% to an absence for a control interview and 12,5% to an administrative exclusion. Source: French Ministry of Work, DARES, ANPE, “Premières synthèses”, February 2008. However it happens that absences for control interviews are due to an undeclared new job.

low-rank civil servants, who, in order to keep their position in intra-institutional relations as well as in control interviews, have to find a meaning in their practices, get involved in them. They “play” the control “game” (the fun of investigating and finding out a hidden truth being a real motivator in professional life). It is also in these interactions and routine practices, legitimized by the dominating discourse and now presented in a flattering light with fresh financial back-up and training courses, which make controlling a “profession”, that the shift of the social state towards austerity is operated (harsher penalties, benefits cut off, “cheats” tracked down, etc.)

From bureaucratic control to social control

“There is now a strong temptation of social control of the poor, or just welfare recipients as long as their benefits are not coupled with insurance contributions. There was as early as the 1960s a lot of literature about how the welfare state had normalizing or even authoritarian goals. But it is only thirty years later that the issue really matters, when this accusatory literature is long gone!” (Rosanvallon, 1995: 211-212). The writer can by no means be suspected of being an admirer of radical 1960s thought. He is one of the major figures of social liberalism in France. One can but consider, as he does, that “the temptation of social control” is now a crucial issue.

The role of individualized control practices is gradually shifting away with the rise of “active social state” logics. As long as benefits were seen as a relief, or even a right, controls could only be a bureaucratic practice, which existed to ensure benefits were duly paid. If benefits are considered in the perspective of going back to work, the controls acquire a new status, no matter whether benefits are seen as a temporary necessity with a gradually deterrent effect, or if they are paid only if recipients seek employment. In this situation, controls become a tool for social policies, a means of controlling the recipients’ behaviour, and orientate it not only towards obeying institutional rules and contracts, but also towards imposing practices (have them adjusted to the employment market) and tendencies (availability, mobility, etc.).

The production of moral judgements (on “good will” or how to organize one’s private life), practical injunctions (do not lose your papers, wake up in the morning), penalty decisions (to reduce or cut off benefits according to the behaviour observed) are, in this perspective, more than the side effects of the bureaucratic treatment of the poor. They are now its very objectives, and are increasingly orientated towards improving behaviour (Wacquant, 2008). In other words, (bureaucratic) control is becoming a tool of (social) control of the poor, or to paraphrase Michel Foucault, a tool of a “behaviour government” of the pauperized working class⁸. This is where ethnographic research, revealing how this behaviour government operates, is a way of shedding light on the structural characteristics of the transformations of the social state, and provides us with a critical approach. This makes available material for those who want to bring about change

Conclusion

This paper has tried to show that policy ethnography can by no means be limited to the production of data on concrete situations and the experience of field workers, asked to

⁸ For an overview of recent studies on welfare in a so-called post-structuralist perspective more or less directly inspired by Foucault, see Morgen & Masklovky, 2003: 321-322.

integrate the “human factor” in a managerial approach which aims to “improve efficiency” of public programmes. Far from the fake realism of the reproduction of “real-life” experiences and of the social engineering of public policies, I have shown how ethnographic investigation can contribute to the critical analysis of general tendencies in the treatment of the poor, and tried to give an example of what critical policy ethnography can be. The categorization of population is in my opinion a crucial point. Ethnographic work is a key tool in deconstructing official categories and also allows for the revelation of the practical logics from which they originate (e.g. Yanow, 2003). This kind of approach applies more specifically to policies which consist in governing populations.

Let us point out that the critical powers of policy ethnography are only complete on two conditions. First, the relevance of this approach depends on how policies are structured. It is a very relevant approach owing to social atomization, the individualization of social administration, “de-objectivation” of collective categories and the crucial role of low-rank civil servants who shape social policies today. But it is not so relevant when dealing with the social state of the 1945-1975 period. This approach is only complete if it avoids the scholastic and damaging opposition between “micro” and “macro” approaches or, using the vocabulary of mainstream policy analysis, between bottom-up and top-down approaches. This vertical vision (which is actually the bureaucratic vision) must be avoided, so as to obtain variation in scales and analysis levels. Much more than a methodological precision, this is a programme aiming to reproduce chains of interdependency and circuits of domination, or, to paraphrase Pierre Bourdieu, to reproduce “causal series that lead from the very core of the state to the most deprived spheres in the social world” (Bourdieu, 1999: 182).

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