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▶ To cite this version:

Vincent Dubois. Institutional Order, Interaction Order and Social Order: Administering Welfare, Disciplining the Poor. 2013. halshs-00837517

HAL Id: halshs-00837517
https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00837517

Preprint submitted on 22 Jun 2013

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Institutional Order, Interaction Order and Social Order: Administering Welfare, Disciplining the Poor[1]

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Abstract. In his famous 1982 address as a president of the American Sociological Association, Erving Goffman returns to the relation between the interaction order and social structures, which he defines as a 'loose coupling'. This paper elaborates on this intriguing but partially disappointing response, and proposes to complement it by analyzing the role of institutions. First, individual interactions, shaped by macrostructural patterns while never reducible to them, do not matter always and everywhere in terms of impact on social structures. They do under specific conditions and settings. Second, institutions can be regarded, in a Durkheimian perspective, as "crystallized social forms," which make social norms and patterns of collective life appear concretely in the phenomenal world, expressing and reproducing the social order. Third, when institutions proceed in an individualizing and atomizing way, interactions matter; they become a means for assigning identities and statuses, and for regulating individual behaviors. Beyond a "loose coupling" between the interaction order and the social order, institutions can then be viewed as forging a strong link between these two levels. To illustrate these propositions, this paper focuses on "people-processing encounters" during which, and thanks to which, "even the most disadvantaged categories continue to cooperate," to quote again Goffman's terms; namely on interactions between welfare officials and their clients.

Keywords: Interaction order; Social structures; Institutions; People-processing encounters; Welfare; Erving Goffman.

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[1] This paper is the written version of the talk I gave at the University of Porto on May 25, 2012, and should be read as such, since I decided to keep the original tone of an oral speech. Thanks to Linda Garat for her kind help.

1. Beyond the "Loose Coupling" of Interaction Order and Social Order: the Role of Institutions

In the famous address as a president of the American Sociological Association he was not able to present but which was published a few months after he passed away, Erving Goffman returns to what he calls "the interaction order," and to its relation with social structures (Goffman, 1983). The use of this notion makes clear that, according to him, interactions have their own structure, and should be regarded as a relevant analysis unit for sociological research in general. Conversations, social rituals, service relationships or people-processing encounters follow implicit rules in comparable ways despite the variety of social contexts in which they take place, and despite the differences of the social patterns of participants who take part in them. This regularity allows thinking in terms of an interaction order, as a specific and major aspect of social life, and as a way (if not as *the* way) by which what we call "society" comes into being.

The existence of an interaction order does not amount to the entire separation of this order from aspects external to the interactions. In a specifically Goffmanian perspective, this "outside" is mainly issued from the history of the previous interactions the participants were involved in, and consists in what they know of each other (and what they think the others know about each other). This mutual and partially shared knowledge is included in the interactions and shapes them. But Goffman also elaborates on the links between interactions and the macro level of social reality, which he calls "social structures."

First, he considers "the direct impact of situational effects upon social structure" (8), for example, reminding us that "a great deal of the work of organization […] is done face-to-face," and that

"the interaction order bluntly impinges on macroscopic entities" (8). Interactions during which people are being processed in various kinds of organizations (a hospital, a police station or the human resources department of a private company) provide convincing evidences of the macro impact individual encounters can have. Goffman calls them "people-processing encounters, encounters in which the 'impression' subjects made during the interaction affects their life chances." He goes on: "It is in these processing encounters, then, that the quiet sorting can occur which […] reproduces the social order" (8). But this conservative impact is in no way mechanical. The arrangement of a participant's real or apparent attributes made during people-processing encounters ordinarily allows for the surreptitious consolidation of structural lines, but the same arrangement can also serve to loosen them, says Goffman. The unpredictability of the outcomes of interactions (reproducing or challenging the social order) is an additional argument in favor of their analysis.

This does not mean, however, that all macrosociological features of society should be deduced from individual encounters, and reduced to an aggregation of interactional effects. Goffman makes it clear: "to speak of the relatively autonomous forms of life in the interaction order […] is not to put forward these forms as somehow prior, fundamental, or constitutive of the shape of macroscopic phenomena" (9). If interactions have an impact on social structure, they are also related to it in other ways. This relation must not be reduced to causal determination or to "dependency on social structures" (12). But participants play their role according to their attributes defined at the macro level that are invested or perceived during the interaction, according to their perception of the other participants' attributes, and according to their perception of the perceptions of their own attributes by other participants. This is a way to account for the presence of the social order in the interaction order. Pierre Bourdieu made

comparable comments, despite obvious theoretical differences, stating, "the truth of interaction is never entirely to be found in interaction as it is available to observation" (Bourdieu 1990: 127). This does not mean that to him interactions are meaningless, as he later proved by observing encounters between house salesmen and their clients in his subsequent research on housing. As an example of the (indirect) impact of social structures on the interaction order, Goffman evokes the poor and explains that "even the most disadvantaged categories continue to cooperate — a fact hidden by the manifest ill will their members may display in regard to a few norms while sustaining all the rest. Perhaps behind a willingness to accept the way things are ordered is the brutal fact of one's place in the social structure and the real or imagined cost of allowing oneself to be singled out as a malcontent" (6).

The interaction order has its own rules but also depends on matters outside the interaction. Interactions can produce macrostructural effects, but this does not amount to the point that all the macrostructure derives from interactions. What is, then, the relationship between the interaction order and the social order (or social macrostructures)? Goffman's response is fully consistent, but remains somewhat vague or at least open to interpretation; there is a "nonexclusive linkage — a 'loose coupling'— between interactional practices and social structures" (11). On this intriguing but partially disappointing response I will develop this paper. My approach is indirectly inspired by Robert Castel's reading of Goffman's *Asylums* (1968). Following Castel, Goffman's focus on individual interactions tends in this case, in what he calls a Durkheimian way, to account for a structural pattern of the functioning of the psychiatric institution, which precisely proceeds by individualizing the treatment of the patients in a series of face-to-face interactions. In that sense, "it is the institutional organization which imposes these atomizing descriptions, because it constitutes an atomized reality: a life made of shattered fragments, cut into pieces by the

institutional dynamic" (Castel 1989). I will draw three general propositions from this comment. First, individual interactions do not matter always and everywhere in terms of impact on social structures, but they do under specific conditions and settings. Second, institutions can be regarded, here again in a Durkheimian perspective, as "crystallized social forms," which make social norms and patterns of collective life appear concretely in the phenomenal world, expressing and reproducing the social order. Third, when institutions proceed in an individualizing and atomizing way, interactions matter; they become a means for assigning identities and statuses, and for regulating individual behaviors. Beyond a "loose coupling" between the interaction order and the social order, institutions can then be viewed as forging a strong link between these two levels.

2. Institutions of the Post-Welfare Era and the Maintenance of Social Order through Individual Interactions

To illustrate these propositions, I will focus on "people-processing encounters" during which, and thanks to which, "even the most disadvantaged categories continue to cooperate," to quote again Goffman's terms; namely on interactions between welfare officials and their clients. These reflections are based on three fieldworks I conducted in France. The first one accounts for the everyday encounters between clerks and claimants and recipients in welfare offices (Dubois, 2010a and 2010b). The second one consists in direct observation of implementation of anti-welfare fraud policies, and of the control of minimum income recipients, mainly single mothers and long-term unemployed (Dubois, 2009 and forthcoming). My third fieldwork pertains to the control of the unemployed, this control being mainly centered on the question of active job search. These three fieldworks rely on several methods, but I will concentrate here on the results of interviews conducted with street-level bureaucrats, and moreover on the findings issued from direct observation, in welfare offices, as well as during interrogations of supposed welfare cheaters and inquiries by welfare inspectors, mainly at the recipients' homes.

This research shows how public institutions can contribute to reproducing the social order through inter-individual interactions, and illustrates the theoretical proposition formulated earlier in this paper. This is not a general statement but rather a specific and historical hypothesis. I do not mean that all institutions govern the conducts of every social group. I do not mean either that welfare institutions have always fulfilled their social functions through direct interactions. But this proposition, based on aspects of the specific situation of French welfare during the last two decades, is aimed to draw possible comparisons with other historical contexts, other national

cases and perhaps with other types of institutions, and to reflect from a theoretical standpoint on the relationship between institutional, interaction and social orders, or, more precisely, on the role of institutions in the relationship between interaction order and social order.

My hypothesis is twofold. First, due to the social and economic crisis, and especially to a persistent high unemployment rate, public institutions, and among them welfare institutions, have been playing an increasingly important role in terms of social integration and social control of the underprivileged fractions of the working-class. Precisely, these fractions are less and less working ones, and we could say that public institutions tend to fulfill the integration and control functions that factory work used to fulfill, as Isabelle Coutant and Xavier Zunigo have shown in the case of the idle youth (Coutant, 2005; Zunigo, forthcoming). In that sense, contrary to common belief, institutions have not declined and are not declining. It can be argued, conversely, that they are even more influential in the life of these groups than they used to be (which is ironic in a time of the so-called withdrawal of the state).

The second part of my hypothesis is related to the transformations of welfare rights. In France, as in other western European countries, but unlike in the USA (Skocpol, 1992), the formation of a universal and redistributive welfare state, from the end of the 19th century to the period after World War II, was accompanied by a progressive, though never complete, shift from public charity distributed on the basis of a judgment on the characteristics of applicants, to social rights granted on the basis of an established status. Pension, medical and unemployment payments are in this logic the counterpart of contributions paid by workers, which entitle them to these benefits. The recognition of such statutes implies that certain legal categories guarantee public protection against a risk defined as a collective. All of this is well known. What I want to

underline is that these collective categories have recently been seriously questioned, due to seismic changes in socioeconomic conditions and in social policies. Concerning social policy models, the associated trends of individualization and responsibilization lead to a renewed logic of public charity, which attributes benefits not because of an established right (as in the so-called classical or passive welfare) but following the evaluation of individual situations. This renders individual interactions strategic ones, insofar as they affect the life chances of the clients who participate in these encounters, to again use Goffman's terms.

Individualization takes several forms. Contractualization results in the end of entitlement, as welfare clients no longer have a status, but are contracting individuals whose personal involvement is required. This accompanies an injunction to draw up a "project" (a professional, training or insertion project, for instance), which tends to take what is institutionally possible and desirable as personal desires. On top of these procedures and systems, are administrative practices such as "personal monitoring" of jobseekers or "follow-up" of "integration projects."

This tendency towards individualization is combined with 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. The first one is an injunction to accept responsibility (with mottos such as "take care of yourself," "be independent," "do not expect everything from the state"). Another meaning of responsibilization is the denunciation of individual responsibilities of the poor, such as their lack of will, laziness, negligence or even dishonesty. Beyond the reach of 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 suspended for not attending monitoring sessions, or the obligation to accept certain job offers).

This general context changes the functions and the meaning of bureaucratic interactions in the implementation of welfare policies. We can no longer reduce them to insignificant administrative routine or to the neutral entry point of bureaucratic machinery. To some extent they can be regarded as “where the action is,” since decisions are made during these interactions and based on the way they take place (Dubois, 2013). More generally, they are now increasingly a key element in the fulfillment of the social functions of welfare.

Let me now provide some evidences and examples. I will initially focus on bureaucratic power during daily encounters in welfare offices, and will argue that this power is double-faced, coercive on the one hand, integrative on the other. Then I will elaborate on control practices in welfare, showing how direct interactions in the implementation of control policies have become part of a general change (the behavioral and coercive turn of policies toward the poor) and how bureaucratic control during individual encounters can become a form of social control having strong implications in terms of social organization.

3. The Two Faces of Bureaucratic Power: Daily Encounters in Welfare Offices

I conducted my fieldwork in French welfare agencies called *Caisses d’allocations familiales*, which are part of the national social security system and provide a full range of benefits, from non means-tested family benefits, to housing allowances and minimum income. As a result, recipients come from various socio-economic backgrounds, from those enjoying stable jobs and a comfortable level of income who receive non means-tested family benefits, to the working poor

who need welfare benefits to complement their salary, to those who fully depend on welfare, such as single mothers, the long-term unemployed and homeless people.

The claimants who appear at these offices are not representative of this mixed population. Except for the most de-socialized, the poorer people are the more often they come. As a result, the most underprivileged compose the vast majority of the visitors, although they are not the most numerous recipients. There are several reasons for this discrepancy. The more people depend on welfare, the more they worry about delays in their payments or of other administrative problems. They have a more prospective attitude, seeking information and for any possible additional benefits which could help them make ends meet. In addition, the poorer they are, the more paperwork they are required to complete, the forms being more complex for minimum income than for family benefits, for instance. Instability in terms of housing, work, couple and family life, which defines underprivileged conditions, also requires more contacts with welfare bureaucracy, for any of these changes may impact their benefits. Lastly, cultural deprivation, in terms of the lack of linguistic skills to understand a letter or to write one, or with regard to the basic knowledge as to how to deal with bureaucracy, accounts for a stronger need for direct contact, and explains more frequent visits.

Dependency on welfare and the social gap between claimants and agents provide the basis for symbolic domination. Under such conditions, welfare clients can be submitted to moral judgments, depicting their behavior as deviant, in terms of attitudes toward work, family or welfare itself. Symbolic domination also consists in the translation of welfare clients' lives into administrative categories, even if they do not agree with this categorization. In other words, they have to comply with the legitimate definition of their own situation, this definition being the

monopoly of welfare bureaucracy. To some extent, they have no other choice than to view their own situation in the terms imposed on them by welfare agents.

All of this leads to interpreting the specific interactions that are bureaucratic encounters in welfare offices as being shaped by pre-existing relations of social domination and as occasions for a concretization of these domination relations. In other words, “social structures” determine the interaction order, which mainly consists in a reproduction of the social order.

However, without abandoning this perspective, a close observation of what happens during these interactions triggers a more complex view. If we focus on the attitudes of the clients, we can see that these encounters are not only about domination in the narrow sense of the term. First, welfare offices, despite their bureaucratic and anonymous aspect, are places where individuals come to be reinsured, to obtain various sorts of advice or to express their personal problems. As some of them say, the welfare office is “a place to talk,” even if they have to queue for long hours before having access to someone who will hopefully listen to them. In that sense, bureaucratic encounters are also about socialization. Secondly, there is never a sole and exclusive way to interpret attitudes that, even though they can illustrate a social domination framework, must not merely be reduced to it. Clients keeping quiet, unable to describe their situation and to articulate a claim in relevant terms for bureaucracy, or those (sometimes the same ones) who only seem able to express themselves through aggressive behavior, certainly provide examples of experiencing the bureaucratic version of social domination. But silence and violence can have different meanings. If we think in terms of individual identity, we can interpret them as strategies for “the preservation of territory of self,” to use another Goffmanian notion, or as a means to assert oneself, to prove one’s autonomy toward the institution of welfare, be it on a temporary and

situational basis. These behaviors also present tactical dimensions. Keeping quiet may be a way not to tell what clients do not want welfare agents to know about them, whereas the threat of violence may be a way to garner closer attention, a quicker response, or access to the upper echelon of welfare bureaucracy.

If we turn now to the attitudes of welfare agents, the relationship concretized in bureaucratic encounters can vary from submission to help and compassion. The equilibrium between these two facets of the double truth of bureaucratic interactions depends on a set of factors, such as the social characteristics of the clients (their objective situation and their "career" as welfare clients), the characteristics of welfare agents, in terms of social background, career and attitude toward their job, and the subsequent way that they define their role, and lastly, on the social distance between clients and agents, that orients toward empathy (when a female agent deals with a woman with children recently abandoned by her husband, for instance), or toward suspicion (when a young agent deals with a client of his age, in good health, and supposedly unwilling to work).

All of this leads to the conclusion that bureaucratic encounters in welfare offices are closely related to social structures, which in a sense come into being during these interactions, when welfare agents represent social norms and authority, and welfare claimants are assigned a status to which they have hardly any other choice but to accept it. In that sense, social structures orient the way individual interactions take place, and conversely, these interactions participate in the reproduction of the social order. Welfare offices as institutions, embodying and guaranteeing social norms, and as the location where interactions concretely take place, link the social order and the interaction order. This, however, does not mean that these interactions routinely

reproduce the social order. Indeed, neither their course nor their results are as predictable as it would seem. They can be "strategic interactions," in the first sense of the term, for what occurs also depends on the internal dynamics of the encounter (the interaction order), and their outputs can prove highly influential in the management of the recipients' files, which itself determines part of the management of their lives.

4. From Behavioral to Coercive Turn, from Bureaucratic to Social Control, and the Dialectic of Interaction and Social Structures

I will turn now to a more obviously coercive aspect of welfare administration: anti-fraud policies and control over the poor. Welfare fraud and welfare control is as old as welfare. But in France it was not promoted as a policy issue until the mid-1990s. There are many reasons for this change. Among them, control policies can be viewed as the coercive side of the general evolution towards an "active social state" (Dubois, 2007-2008), carrying an individualistic approach to social problems. This approach is individualistic insofar as it defines social problems as the aggregation of individual economic calculation. On the basis of the idea of a "preference for leisure" stated in neoclassical labor economics, this rational-choice assumption gave birth to notions such as "inactivity trap," according to which those on welfare are supposed to "choose" remaining on it rather than getting a job. This notion is in turn itself the intellectual basis for coercive policies aimed at changing the terms of this calculus (Dubois, forthcoming, b). The approach is also individualistic in terms of moral judgment: it consists to some extent in a renewal of old oppositions between the good and the bad poor; the deserving and the undeserving poor; the real unemployed and the fake ones who cheat.

Individual investigations and interrogations remain a major practice among the various tools of control policies, which include data crossing and other digital surveillance technologies. And here again, direct interactions appear to play a key role.

A first argument advocating for this hypothesis relies on the fact that legal norms supposed to be enforced and guaranteed thanks to control are in fact partly defined on the job, during the course of checks and control interactions. This is clear in the case of the main criteria used to control the unemployed. The latter, redefined as "job seekers," are supposed to be involved in an "active job search;" which forms the condition they have to fulfill to be acknowledged as "real" job seekers and to benefit from the associated allowances. It is not clear, however, precisely what an "active job search" is. How many applications per month are required? What is a "real" application as opposed to a "fake" one? What happens when there are hardly any employment opportunities in the activity sector and the region? The answers to these questions do not rely on pre-existing rules, but depend on a wide set of individual patterns and situational effects, such as the past institutional career of the unemployed as an unemployed, his or her personal situation in terms of family or health, the investigator's opinion regarding the situation of the job market in the area and in the activity sector, the arguments of the unemployed being controlled, the justifications he or she is able to formulate, and the general attitude he or she expresses during the interview, in terms of good will, language, appearance and apparent reliability.

Similar comments can be made about one of the main criteria used in the control of minimum income recipients, namely "isolation." Isolation is the basis for providing single parents benefits, and is taken into account in the calculation of other types of minimum benefits, being regarded as a couple and not as isolated having a direct negative impact on the level of these benefits. But

here again, it is not clear what "being isolated" precisely means. Does a sporadic couple relationship lead to the end of "isolation"? Then how many days per week or month spent living under the same roof are required to draw a line between "isolation" and "marital life"? Is "isolation" the same at 25 and at 60 years of age? If the former partner sends gifts to the children, does it mean that he is still part of a "family," or is it only about "maintaining affective links" (to use a bureaucratic phrase) with them? Generally speaking, investigators tend to conclude in the second way. But what about sending money instead of gifts, or paying the rent from time to time? In these cases, the conclusion may veer in the opposite direction.

This unveils the paradox on which welfare control is based. While it is supposed to guarantee the rigorous enforcement of norms, these norms are loosely defined and in the end, the decision to grant or not, to sanction or not, is based on the idea the investigator gets of a specific situation. This idea is itself based on his or her personal habitus that shapes his or her perception of the situation. It is also based on the course of the interaction, the tone of the recipient's voice, the extent to which the stories he or she relates can make sense according to what the investigator regards as plausible, tiny details such as the presence of men's shoes in the apartment of a supposedly single mother, or traces of paint on the hands of a person said to be jobless for months.

As we see, these people-processing institutional encounters depend on pre-existing social structures, crystallized in bureaucratic roles and rules, and interiorized in the habituses of the participants. Conversely, the course of these interactions is not pre-ordained, and their hardly predictable conclusions have a direct impact on the recipients, who may be sanctioned, excluded

from welfare benefits, or confirmed as deserving clients. In that sense, these interactions do matter at a macrostructural level.

Moreover, the role of individual interactions is included if not designed in a general institutional and policy setting. To some extent, this setting encompasses a form of "governementality," to use Foucault's notion, which relies on face-to-face interactions. In this perspective, the aforementioned paradox of control is not due to a lack of legal definition, or a bad organization that should be improved. It is a structural pattern of a policy model supposed to be adjusted to individual cases, and which delegates judgments and decisions to lower civil servants. Discretion if not bureaucratic arbitrariness then are not flaws in the system. They fulfill a general function consisting in demonstrating to welfare recipients that their situation as such is precarious, as opposed to a stable "entitlement," and that staying on welfare is no longer a "comfortable" option (if this ever was the case).

As a result, control interrogations are, beyond a functional bureaucratic technique, a tool for the "government of conducts" to again use Foucault's words. During control interactions, welfare recipients are reminded of their responsibilities, provided advice and threatened with sanctions. Redressing their administrative practices by recalling the obligation of accurate information on their situation offers an opportunity to redress more generally their attitudes in moral terms (if we think of sentimental lives described as "erratic"), or regarding work. Here, bureaucratic control practices turn to social control, and individual interactions participate in the reproduction of social norms.

5. Conclusion

Starting with Erving Goffman's concept of a "loose coupling" between the interaction order and social structures, I emphasized on the ways through which social structures are at work during the course of interactions and contribute to shaping them. As I indicated, however, this is not to say that interactions are merely the actualization of pre-existing structures, which would lead to the conclusion that they are entirely predetermined and therefore not worth observing. On the contrary, I provided evidence based on my fieldwork on people-processing encounters in welfare bureaucracy that neither the course of these interactions nor their outcomes can be entirely deduced from pre-given structural patterns.

Beyond the idea of a "loose coupling," I argue that there are structural conditions for individual interactions to follow a partly independent course. Here, these conditions are to be found in the changes in the welfare system, which promote adjustment to individual situations to replace the "one-size-fits-all" traditional standards, which tend to focus on individual behaviors, and present an ample opportunity for street-level bureaucrats to maneuver (Lipsky, 1980). This is a first argument to consider institutions as relevant intermediaries between the interaction order and the social order. Institutions can be viewed as the embodiment of social structures, and concrete locations where encounters symbolize and realize the confrontation of individuals to "society." Institutions are themselves realized through the way individuals come to play institutional roles, and this way is never fully ruled by formal prescriptions, leaving space for interpretation, negotiations, and therefore for situational effects (Lagroye, Offerlé, 2010).

The institutional order may also be considered as the meeting point between the social order and the interaction order in a complementary sense. Agents vested with institutional power can exert influence and domination over others (here, on welfare clients) during individual interactions far more effectively than during most ordinary interactions. As official representatives of the social order they can, at least partly and temporarily, submit individuals to this order in the course of interactions, by making them accept a status and rules of behavior. More concretely, the course of interactions may itself be decisive, in the sense that the way the interactions take place determines decisions, which in turn can have a major impact on the participants' lives (here again, staying on welfare, having benefits cut or being sanctioned).

These analytic propositions do not rely on an abstract and universal notion of institutions. They are conversely elements of a research question, which could be formulated as follows: under which socio-historical conditions can institutions (of what kind, dealing with what kind of population, and what kind of problems), in effect function as intermediaries between the interaction order and the social order? In my view this formulation does not reduce the relevance of my hypothesis to such or such specific context; it expresses the idea that the question of the relationship between the interaction order and the social order must be addressed in a socio-historical perspective.

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