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What do public policies do to their publics?

Keynote speech, 10th *International Conference in Interpretive Policy Analysis*, Lille (France), July 8, 2015

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Introduction

Over the past few months, I have been conducting research on policies against welfare fraud in France, focusing in particular on the recent rise of a reinforced control policy mainly aimed at minimum income and housing benefits recipients and lone mothers. During my fieldwork, I came across a fascinating material in the form of boxes filled to the brim with letters of denunciations reporting the misbehavior of clients to welfare authorities. The authors of these letters are most often neighbors if not relatives of the alleged fraudsters. Intimate knowledge of personal situations is indeed required to document family life, housing conditions or gainful activities. Private conflicts and rivalries are the most common reasons for sending these letters. While a few look like official reports, providing the administration with detailed information and using a formal bureaucratic vocabulary, the vast majority are handwritten, badly misspelled about why Mr. or Mrs. So-and-So should be punished for cheating welfare, often written in capital letters on a torn notebook page. Unlike other countries like the US and the UK, France has no official procedure or incentives for ordinary citizens to report welfare fraud. Such letters have obviously always existed here as elsewhere. But while they are not a new phenomenon, surprisingly enough, their number has recently dramatically increased (twofold between 2007 and 2014).

Why this increase? A possible partial answer to this question is that it might be an effect of changes in policy discourse over the same period. The last decade, especially during the five years of the Sarkozy administration, has certainly been the most intense period for the stigmatization of “the entitled” (*les assistés*), described as unwilling to work and suspected of cheating in addition to being lazy, since the construction of contemporary welfare. It would be

over-simplistic to posit a single causal relationship between this policy discourse and the attitudes towards welfare expressed in these letters of denunciation. Instead of drawing a direct link between them, it is necessary to reflect on the objective social conditions that provide the foundations for the appropriation of such a discourse, thereby rendering it potentially effective if not “performative” (Bourdieu 2003). In this case, the precarisation of working-classes individuals and the heightened competition for jobs, housing and welfare benefits among them have been conducive to renewed forms of social and symbolic separation (Lamont 2000) between those who work and those who do not, and, among them, those who “deserve” support and behave properly and those who do not. In this socio-economic context, the policy discourse blaming welfare recipients in general and welfare “fraudsters” in particular can echo the experience, perceptions, meaning-making practices and attitudes of individuals. This discourse can in turn legitimate and encourage denunciation, usually seen as a morally dubious practice in other contexts. In this sense, the study of letters of denunciation can help us reflect on the relationship between policy discourse and what we at this stage may provisionally call the socio-political attitudes of ordinary citizens.

This illustrates the point I intend to make in this essay. It is by considering this relationship that I offer some answers to the question: What do public policies do to their publics? Here, emphasis will be placed on the symbolic aspect of the question, with a focus on impacts in terms of principles of vision of the social world. In other words I look into how policy discourse and policy generally speaking affect the way people define themselves, view others, and envision social reality. I explore how and to what extent the categories of policy discourse and the social norms enforced through public policies can impact the representations, dispositions and attitudes of the persons subjected to that discourse, in addition to possible changes in their status. This symbolic aspect is strongly linked with material factors and issues, such as, in my research, welfare provision, living conditions, and the possible penalties against fraudsters. While these factors and issues will be considered, they are not a central concern here.

The most common pitfall of plenary essays consists in listing a set of general, theoretical and abstract propositions, which may fulfill the social function of an introductory ceremony to the academic ritual of a conference or a special issue, but can fall into a scholastic rhetoric disconnected from research practices. The diametrically opposed pitfall is to focus on a specific empirical research providing the audience with information on the topic under

scrutiny that might be irrelevant for those with remote research interests. In order to avoid both pitfalls of theoreticism in and empiricism, I have chosen to vary and, as far as possible, combine specific examples from my own research as a basis for some general and conceptual proposals. In turn, I illustrate theoretical statements with concrete cases drawn from my fieldwork. I use my research on social welfare to illustrate four conceptual proposals, from the production of policy discourse to the daily practices of people-processing, and eventually, to the impact these discourses and practices may have on the way people consider the social world.

The social spaces and legitimization of policy-making

My first theoretical proposal consists in positing that the social basis for the making of a policy discourse, and of a policy more generally (*i.e.* the system of relationships between various categories of actors contributing to shape policy and official discourse), is also the social basis for its legitimization. The best analytical tool to account for this double process is in my view Bourdieu's concept of field.

The concept of field as a tool for critical policy analysis

Policy analysts have invented and used many concepts to analyze the social milieus of policy makers, and more generally the relationships between the individuals involved in policy processes. To mention only a few, these include policy networks, policy community, iron triangle, advocacy coalition, epistemic community and many others. These concepts can of course be very useful, but in my view they show several weaknesses, which may vary from one to the other. First, they remain mainly descriptive, as they lack of conceptual elaboration or are not explicitly part of a broader theoretical model. Second, their use is generally not connected to effective methodological tools. Even the concept of policy network, which certainly is the most strongly related to a sophisticated analytical framework and to quantitative analysis (for a good example, see Laumann and Knoke 1987), is often used metaphorically, with suggestive illustrations rather than systematic empirical evidence. Lastly, some of these concepts may suffer from a normative bias, sometimes implicit, as when the 'flexibility' of governance networks is celebrated in contrast with the so-called rigidity of state institutions (for further discussion, see the first part of Dubois 2014).

On the other hand, policy analysts almost never use Bourdieu's concept of field. In my view it is also under-used by sociologists who work on public policies (for a rare recent example, see Itçaina *et al.* 2016). And yet I do think that applying this concept to the social and political spaces in which policies are made would be an important contribution towards a critical sociological approach to public policy (for a complete discussion, see my chapter in Dubois 2014).

A field may be summarily defined as a social microcosm: a space of objective positions held by agents with various types and levels of capitals, and a space of competition between these agents. This microcosm is relatively autonomous from the other fields, defined by specific rules, stakes and forms of capital. The academic field, for instance, be it dependent of private or public funding, has its own norms and its agents usually denounce the possible intervention of private companies or politicians in the internal affairs of academia. These agents do not compete for the same trophies as politicians or athletes. They do not use the same assets in their specific competition, and, again, they do not follow the same rules. A field is a system of relations between agents defined by their position within the field, depending on the level and the structure of their capital, this capital being itself composed of all the assets and resources useful for competition within the field (*i.e.* authority provided by hierarchical status, social capital of relationships with other agents to collaborate with, informational capital of knowledge and expertise, symbolic capital of recognition).

The theory of social fields is not only concerned with describing a social milieu. It is also meant to understand how the outputs of a social milieu (*e.g.* artworks for the arts field, political statements for the political field) are rooted in its structure. The key concept here is homology. According to Bourdieu's field theory, there is a homology between the objective positions held by social agents within the field and their preferences, choices, stances, discourses. The place where an individual is located in the social space of the field is predictive and explains the options taken by this individual. Or, to put it briefly in a famous phrase known as the Miles' Law: "Where you stand depends on where you sit" (Miles 1978). If we move from an individual point of view to a global one, this means that the outputs of a field in a specific period of time (*e.g.* the variety of artistic genres or possible and thinkable political statements) "reflect", so to speak, the structure of the positions of producers (artists or politicians), namely the social agents of the arts field and of the political field.

Using this analytical tool in the policy world leads to the basic postulate arguing that from a sociological point of view, a public policy can be defined as *the product of practices and representations of social agents who contribute to policy making*. These practices and representations are determined by the objective position of these agents, their social characteristics, their interests, and by the structure of relations between them, or, in other words, by their position in the field.

This postulate brings us to a general hypothesis. It is quite obvious that the competing options in the definition of a policy relate to the positions and interests of those who defend them, inside the governmental arena (with the competition between various departments), or outside of it (among interest groups and expert agencies, for instance). To go beyond this fairly trivial statement, I propose to account for the correspondence (more precisely: the homology) between the contents of a policy (orientation, style), and the relational structure of the space of agents involved in its production. This means that the compromises and the balance between competing options characterizing a policy match the structure of power relations within the field and the concrete arrangements established on this basis. Following this reasoning, we can propose a sociological and critical *explicans* (the structure of a policy field) to account for an *explicanda* (the nature of a given policy).

There are several possible uses of this concept in policy analysis. I list the five main ones below.

- 1) The concept of field can be applied specifically to the space of bureaucracy, which brings together the official positions defining the state (Bourdieu 2014). This application can be useful on one level to understand how competing dispositions within the system of relationships of a public service determine actual policy orientations and practices (see for instance Woolford and Curran 2013). Here, the concept of field provides a sociologically informed internal view of the official policy-makers and of their distinctive patterns, problems and competitions.
- 2) It is also possible to move out of bureaucracy in the strict sense and to use the concept of field to describe the internal structure of social space that is non-bureaucratic but nevertheless significantly contributes to policy making. This was for instance done by Thomas Medvetz in his study of American think tanks (Medvetz 2014).

3) At the intersection of the first two levels, a policy field can be defined as the relational system dedicated to the regulation of a specific policy domain, bringing together agents from the bureaucratic field and agents from other fields, such as representatives of interest groups, CEOs of private companies or independent experts. Bourdieu and Christin did this in their research on housing policy reform in France in the mid-seventies, which remains the main example of a systematic use of the concept of field in the critical analysis of a policy (Bourdieu 2005, Chapter 2, “The state and the construction of the market”).

4) An institutionalized system, including bureaucrats, politicians, experts, interest groups, in which a full range of public policies are made, can also be analyzed through the lenses of field theory. Didier Georgakakis and Jay Rowell gave an excellent example of such an approach in their analysis of the European Union as “the field of Eurocracy” (Georgakakis and Rowell 2013).

5) In many cases, the making of a policy involves a wide range of actors holding heterogeneous positions in various fields, and, therefore, results from the relations between these various fields. In the third possible use of the concept of field I mentioned above, the system of positions and power built in a specific policy domain is considered as a field on its own. At this fifth and last level, I propose to take into account the various social fields involved in the making of a policy and to describe the relations between them in order to analyze the interdependence system they form. To put it in Bourdieu’s words, this consists in setting the system of relations (inter-fields) between systems of relations (fields), considering it as the locus for the definition of policy orientations. In this perspective, a policy orientation is viewed as the outcome a) of the internal balance of power within each field involved in the process; b) of the interactions between these fields.

The reinforcement of surveillance and penalties for welfare recipients as an output of interactions between fields

Policy reforms and new programs concerning the surveillance and sanction of welfare clients in France illustrate this role of interdependent various fields. In the following I focus on the four social fields most directly active in the success of this policy orientation.

First, the scientific field of economic expertise contributes to framing policies. It provides intellectual models which can play two roles: they sometimes strongly influence policy-

making; they are referred to after the fact by policy-makers in order to confer so-called scientific legitimacy on political orientations defined on different grounds. The field of economic expertise, now dominated by neoclassical orthodox approaches, paved the way for more control in welfare. The success of the concept of inactivity trap, or poverty trap, is a good example of this role. To put it simply: according to this model individuals on welfare calculate their financial interest to decide whether they take a job or stay on welfare. When the level of welfare benefits is “too high”, they will prefer to stay on welfare. While this debatable model will not be debated here, I can only observe that it has been widely used as a basis for welfare reform and its legitimization, including the development of control and sanctions as incentives to work. This has been the case in France, as we can see in numerous policy recommendations by economists. To mention only one, Michel Camdessus, former director of the IMF in 2004, in a report on the general economic situation of the country entitled ‘The burst: towards a new growth for France’, surprisingly devoted numerous pages to urging the government to strengthen control over the unemployed and welfare recipients, directly in line with the inactivity trap model.

Second, in the bureaucratic field, the welfare elite took a decisive managerial turn, beginning in the early 1990s, whose impact has been increasingly visible during the past two decades. These economic models became all the more influential as a new generation of higher civil servants with a background in management and in economics replaced the previous one, trained in law and attached to the old welfare model. At this level, welfare control was defined as a good management technique. The new welfare officials laid emphasis on financial concerns and imposed neo-managerial references and practices on their organizations and their agents. Within the bureaucratic field, the ministry for finance and budget, the Court of Auditors (*Cour des Comptes*) and the accounting departments in welfare organizations came to play a decisive role in the management of welfare provision, including a new “risk management” strategy which in practice consists in new tools for monitoring and sanctioning welfare recipients.

These orientations were widely reported if not supported in the media field. In my research I found hardly any paper on welfare fraud before the mid-1990s. By contrast, countless amounts were published after this date, especially after the most important reforms of the early 2000s. This chronology shows that the media have not fulfilled an agenda-setting function, urging the government to make reforms. On the contrary, they have generally

followed the government on these issues, spurring public support for governmental reforms. While some left-wing papers were initially critical and used references to George Orwell to denounce a surveillance society, the vast majority of articles denounce welfare fraud as a scourge requiring more control. Not all the press follows this orientation, but crucially, national TV channels and mainstream newspapers do.

Fourth and last, the internal dynamics of the political field appear to play a prominent role. The right has unsurprisingly promoted the theme of welfare fraud. In 1995, this was to retain the support of the privileged fractions of the conservative electorate and of independent workers. Later, it became an explicit means to gain support from the working classes, among which turnouts are very low. Criticizing the “lazy entitled” became a very common way for right-wing politicians to present themselves as sharing the concerns of workers who can hardly make ends meet, and are supposed and encouraged to be upset with “their neighbor who stays home and makes as much money on welfare”. This is in my view a good example of the circular effect of a political discourse, which by repeating the same arguments reinforces if not generates the concerns to which it supposedly responds. This is also an illustration of how right-wing themes spread across the political spectrum. Other issues, such as security and immigration, have become central in the political debate on welfare and beyond. The moderate left which alternates with the right at the government could not avoid addressing them. Its leaders have had to do so in order to appear as credible government officials, tough on crime and fraud, far from the “over-leniency” denounced by their competitors. By doing so, they have progressively included some of their opponents’ arguments into their own discourse, and unintentionally contributed to the political success of these themes.

The construction of welfare fraud as a public problem, and the new relevant surveillance policies result from the interaction between these four fields, and not from political will. The importance granted to this issue and the accompanying policy initiatives in the public debate is no way proportional to its objective impact Tax evasion (20 to 25 billion euros per year), which is estimated to approximately amount for ten times the amount of welfare abuse (2 to 3 billion per) year), is far less present in the public debate. It became a prominent issue on the media, political and judicial agendas only after it was revealed in December 2012 that the minister of the Treasury himself (Jérôme Cahuzac) had undeclared bank accounts in Switzerland. While some steps were subsequently taken to fight tax evasion, they were not as

significant as the measures against welfare fraud, neither from a political nor from a policy point of view.

Welfare fraud owes its success as an object of public rhetoric to its combination of a wide range of registers, from financial rigor to morals, from expertise to casual conversation and barroom politics. Its targets can vary from the bad mothers who “have children to live on welfare” to the bad immigrants who come to France to abuse the system; it is also part of the delegitimization of welfare in general, even if it, somewhat ironically, the system is depicted as in need of saving because it is supposedly undermined by fraud. This rhetoric peaked under the Sarkozy regime, when welfare fraud and entitlement were contrasted with “the work value” (*la valeur travail*) promoted as the key element of the governmental program to “redress” French society.

This brings us back to my first proposal: the legitimization of a policy orientation rests on the social structure of its definition. If the reinforcement of control over the poor has become an option, it is because it has been promoted simultaneously in various fields, following their own rationales. As a result, it appears as a shared orientation, if not as a self-evident one.

Policy-making as symbolic power

Imposing the legitimate point of view

This legitimization process of a policy orientation is related to the broader process of how in turn policies legitimize a specific view on the social order, and, by doing so, social order itself. My point here is that the legitimization process of a policy pertains to the promotion of a specific principles for approaching problems, situations and people as *the* legitimate point of view. Welfare reform and its discourse did not invent the opposition between hardworking taxpayers and people staying on welfare or between the deserving and the undeserving poor. However, welfare reform did renew and reinforce these divisions and contributed to have them taken for granted among the general public. This has a concrete impact on the actions of: writing letters of denunciation, for instance, which, in that perspective, has become a more legitimate and easily doable act.

This is one of the ways to explore what policies do to their publics: they promote if not impose a specific point of view as the legitimate one. This is the reason why I think symbolic power is at the core of policy, and why reciprocally, policy-making is about exerting symbolic power, meaning that policy plays a key role in the adjustment of mental structures to social structures.

This approach does not postulate a mechanical impact of policy discourse on the ways of thinking of the populations subjected to it. There are social conditions for this power to be effective, which vary from one policy domain to another, and according to the resources at the disposal of social agents to resist it. And this power is concretely exerted through concrete practices and *dispositifs*, to use Foucault's word. In order to illustrate how symbolic power is made concrete through public policy, I will turn now to the processes of classification and category-making at work in policy-making.

Policy as a classification process

The legitimate point of view on social reality is expressed through policy categories, which are both tools for the interpretation of situations and classifications used and enforced in routine bureaucratic practices. Since policy commonly operates by defining the categories through which people and problems are perceived and dealt with, the analysis of classification processes is a needed part of a comprehensive critical policy analysis (Yanow 2003). In this perspective, I propose a three-step research program: first unveiling the construction of official categories; second, analyzing their mobilization in unequal power relationships by policy agents who process people and handle public problems; and third, identifying the impact of official categories on the people who come to internalize them.

A first step consists in questioning the conventional policy categories, showing their social and political roots and, by doing so, their non-natural, non-necessary character. This follows an anthropological tradition initiated by Durkheim and Mauss, who demonstrated in their seminal work on primitive classifications that categories of perception of the world rest on the structures of the society which uses them (Durkheim and Mauss 1963). On this basis, the genetic approach accounts for the historical making of these classifications, and the theory of social fields enables us to establish the relational dynamics which promoted them as legitimate classifications.

In a second step, studying policy categories is about observing how policy-makers and administrations use them and apply them to problems and people. Therein lies a possible convergence between street-level bureaucracy theory and the sociology of symbolic power. The study of bureaucratic work, and more precisely of what Goffman called “people processing encounters” illustrates how formal rules and official categories are applied to people (Goffman 1983). Welfare bureaucrats relate their definition of the situations of the poor they meet to standard criteria and categories, translating the lives of their clients into the language of bureaucratic files. They decide who is to be regarded as a single mother or unemployed, and their classification is imposed on the individuals subjected to it, even if they have a different notion of their own status. This symbolic power of definition is all the more effective as it has concrete and material impacts: receiving benefits or not, being sanctioned or not. It is also all the more effective as the relationship between bureaucrats and welfare clients is unequal. Clients depend on welfare, and they generally have nothing but the weapons of the weak to face bureaucracy: resignation, silence, feigned docility, and sporadic eruptions of verbal or physical violence.

This brings me to the social differentiation of these enforcement processes. To give just one example, there are for instance striking differences between bureaucracy’s handling of tax evasion (Spire 2012) and its handling of welfare fraud. In the first case, when bureaucrats face individuals from the middle and upper classes, arrangements and negotiation prevail. Tax fraudsters may be charged additional taxes, but are rarely prosecuted, and in the few cases where they are, sentences are generally lenient. In the case of welfare, bureaucrats face individuals from precarious fractions of the lower classes, and no room is left for negotiation: stigmatization and coercion prevail.

Three comments

Accounting for what policies do to their publics requires considering the social patterns of the different “publics”. This may seem self-evident, but it is not in policy analysis, even in interpretive and critical policy analysis, in which, for instance, social class is not systematically considered as a factor. Here I would like to advocate for a framework that evidences the entanglement of class, race and gender in the practices of policy-makers and street-level bureaucrats (Watkins-Hayes 2009), in the attitudes of individuals subjected to policy, and in the way they are “processed” by the policy machinery.

Social differentiation is not limited to the question of class, defined as a stable position in the social space. It is also about other aspects defining one’s position, such as gender and race, and about social

trajectories. Individual relationships to welfare bureaucracy vary according to social mobility trajectories. The clients most prone to displaying aggressive behavior, for instance, are not the most impoverished, long-term welfare clients, but rather those who have recently experienced social downgrading and reject the welfare administration as a symbol of their own decline, and of the social system they view as responsible for this decline. Therefore, individual relationships to welfare bureaucracy also vary according to the stage in the welfare client's "career", from newcomers who lose themselves in red tape and bureaucratic language to regular clients who know the written and unwritten rules and can more easily find their way. These differences impact the intensity and the forms taken by symbolic power; and the ways in which different publics can deal with that power.

This leads us to a third remark. Analyzing what public policies do to their publics requires reflecting on *how these publics do* with the policies they are subjected to. The power relationship between policy agents and ordinary citizens may be unbalanced, but this does not mean that citizens are passive and irreversibly dominated. Depending on their situations, resources, and social dispositions, they can use tactics to escape domination or subvert, at least partially and temporarily. Docility at the desk of a welfare office, for instance, may be nothing but a strategy to obtain compassion and help. This does not mean that there is no bureaucratic domination, but it shows its complexity and its nuances.

Having these nuances and complexity in mind, it is possible to account for the impact policy categories may have on people. This is the third and last stage of a research program on policy categorization processes. One of the most effective ways of addressing this question is to evaluate to what extent individuals categorized by policy in turn refer to these categories to define their situation or identity. In his work on scientific categories Ian Hacking has coined the phrase "looping effect" to designate how "invented" or constructed categories become "real", in the sense that they create new groups – a process he terms "making up people". Similar looping effects occur when policy subjects come to define themselves in reference to the policy categories used to classify them. Here we have a good illustration of symbolic power, with the nuances I mentioned before: the possible internalization of principles of vision and division inculcated through the unequal relationship between policy agents, vested with the power and legitimacy of official policy, and individuals subjected to it. This symbolic power can be violent when the categories enforced contradict subjective views and tend to replace them. I once heard a bureaucrat tell a claimant in a welfare office: "no, you are not regarded as a mother, because you do not meet the criteria of [having] affective ties [with your children]". This may lead some potential claimants to turn down welfare entirely: refusing to be defined and stigmatized as a welfare client is one among the various reasons for the non-take up of welfare benefits.

Symbolic power gains effectiveness when official categories match the self-definition of identity or converge with views rooted in personal experience. The official vision then

becomes “a well-founded illusion”, to use Durkheim’s phrase about religion, and is all the more legitimate and unquestioned as it is regarded as natural and self-evident.

Concluding remarks

The diffusion of a policy discourse and practice against fraud, stigmatizing the allegedly anti-social behaviors of people accused of preferring welfare to work, certainly encourages letters of denunciation. Yet there is no direct causal relationship involved. The official symbolic boundaries between workers and the entitled, between deserving and undeserving poor, are aligned with the ordinary symbolic boundaries between “them” and “us”, in a context of socioeconomic crisis and tensions between social groups – here, between fractions of the lower classes. Like the gossip studied by Norbert Elias, denunciation letters are a way to assert one’s position on the right side of the fence (Elias and Scotson 1994, pp.89–105). Policy discourse is therefore not the only causal factor. But it does matter, as it legitimates the practice of denunciation, and provides this practice with a general socio-political meaning.

I have argued that a partial answer to the question “What do policies do to their public?” is that citizens internalize and utilize principles of vision and division promoted by public policies. In the process, I have also raised the question of how citizens (make things) do with the policies they are subjected to, which is in my view essential to provide a realistic view of domination processes. This should be complemented with a third question, which could be the topic of another essay: what do the publics do to policies?

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