

Welfare beneficiaries: more and more accountable

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In his book *Contrôler les assistés* (Controlling welfare beneficiaries), Vincent Dubois, researcher at the SAGE research unit (Societies, Stakeholders and Governments in Europe), explores the logic of control that has developed over the past years in welfare offices, and which is detrimental to the most underprivileged.

What do you mean by a welfare beneficiary?

I draw on the definition of poverty put forward by Georg Simmel whose vision of the poor as a social category resulted from this category receiving state benefits. I therefore use this term without the pejorative connotation that is adopted in current debates.

How did your investigation unfold?

During a field survey that I carried out in 1995 in child benefit offices, I was struck by how often the staff at the reception desks were suspicious of the visitors. It was at that time that Alain Juppé ordered a report to be drafted on abusive practices. My attention was drawn to what happens when those at the highest level of state converge with junior employees. At the beginning of the year 2000, I went back to the site to delve into this question further. This was the epoch when a policy of control was beginning to become more formal. I returned to the site again in 2016/2017, when the policy had developed significantly, and the long duration of the survey allowed me to understand the measure of this development. I therefore multiplied the points of entry, from the Court of Auditors to inspectors' home surveys, taking in along the way the political debate or the treatment of such matters in the press.



Vincent Dubois is part of the Societies, Stakeholders and Governments in Europe (SAGE) research unit.

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What are your main observations?

Standardisation, reinforcement and toughening of practices emerged at the same time as national control policies were being put into place. When the notion of social fraud matured, the rationale for more and more controls became necessary, with the most rigid situations prevailing and critical situations that could oppose these weakening. The rule of might was best, if we may call it that, and could be observed in both political debates and in the offices of the authorities. For example, in the committees that deal with fraud cases, it is easier to adopt a severe stance than it is to try and find mitigating circumstances, even when these are formulated by those in high-level positions.

Are the poor more exposed to sanctions?

Another result was to illustrate the “differential management of illegalisms” described by Michel Foucault. Certain failures are more or less accepted, according to social categories. The arsenal developed in the fight against fraud regarding social benefits has thus developed on a larger scale than it has against fiscal fraud, namely in the use of technological statistics to identify possible cases of fraud. This means 1 out of 30 fraud cases are detected. This differential management can even be observed among the population of those receiving social benefits. Statistically, the more vulnerable a person is, the more he or she is exposed to the risk of controls and sanctions.

Interview by Marion Riegert

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