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## Review

# When the state meets the street: Public service and moral agency

Bernardo Zacka

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Bureaucrats have feelings too. Saying so is no platitude: within political science, scholarly work on bureaucracies has largely portrayed low-level bureaucrats as indifferent public servants sitting behind a desk, stubbornly adhering to arbitrary technicalities. In particular, political scientists have often assumed that street-level bureaucrats wield little legal discretionary power, and, thus, pose at best a principal–agent problem of disobedience and at worst the threat of petty corruption and abuse of authority. Bernardo Zacka’s *When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency* meticulously dismantles those assumptions, providing a refreshing and illuminating look into the everyday work of street-level agents of the state.

Zacka persuasively argues that street-level bureaucrats are, in fact, moral agents ‘vested with a considerable margin of discretion’ (p. 11). More importantly, he makes a compelling case for the normative desirability of that discretionary power – not when unbounded, but when carefully curated to benefit the workings of a democratic state. The book neither focuses on corruption nor other abuses of power, but on the moral agency that bureaucrats (should) enjoy while abiding by the rules of their organization. Zacka’s insights build on fieldwork conducted as a receptionist of the Norville Community Development Initiative, a non-profit antipoverty agency contracted by the state, in a large city in the United States. Additionally, the book draws on a broad array of literatures, from other qualitative work on bureaucracies to psychology, sociology, and normative political philosophy, providing Zacka with an astounding and productive array of interlocutors.

The first two chapters of the book are diagnostic, while the following three have a more normative aim. In the first part of the book, Zacka shows that no matter how refined, policies and laws are imperfect and cannot address all conceivable situations (nor should they, lest they become too rigid). Recognizing those shortcomings is a lesson in ‘epistemic humility’ (p. 58), making a margin of discretionary power not only inescapable but desirable. Street-level bureaucrats



who interact with people face-to-face are better suited to assess the particularities of each case and behave accordingly. Some cases can be dealt with indifferently, some demand more care, and others call for a degree of harshness. The challenge for bureaucrats resides in maintaining their ability to navigate from one ‘mode of appraisal’ to the other. At times, however, one of those ‘modes of appraisal’ stiffens into a ‘moral disposition,’ indistinctly shaping a bureaucrat’s approach to all cases: some bureaucrats become ‘caregivers,’ others ‘enforcers,’ and some irremediably indifferent. Zacka compellingly shows these dispositions to be pathological since they are reductive, ‘lead[ing] to a narrowing of the field of moral perceptions and to a truncated receptivity to normative considerations’ (p. 98).

How can democracies sustain a healthy amount of bureaucratic discretion, one that strikes the delicate balance between the ‘twin dangers of excessive specialization and excessive conformity in moral outlooks’ (p. 200)? This is the normative challenge addressed in the second part of the book. Chapter three discusses the kind of practices of the self—monitoring, modulation, and calibration (p. 150)—that bureaucrats carry out to maintain openness and flexibility. The following chapter addresses the opposite concern, persuasively showing that some degree of individual specialization is important to preserve a diversity of outlooks within the organization. Plurality and peer-accountability shield organizations from homogeneity and rigidity. In the last chapter, Zacka addresses ‘impossible situations,’ in which street-level bureaucrats are pulled in conflicting directions that jeopardize their sense of selves as public servants.

The book is a compelling and necessary examination of bureaucracies in the democratic state. Moreover, it makes a valuable contribution in demonstrating the virtues of doing political theory with an ethnographic sensibility, attuned to the apparently mundane political lives of the citizens of a democratic state. Indeed, I was eager to hear *more* about Zacka’s fieldwork. The book disrupts long-held assumptions while opening new avenues for inquiry.

I will pose three sets of questions. My first and main concern with the book is related to the generalizability of some of its theoretical insights. Zacka’s rich fieldwork was carried out in a state-contracted antipoverty agency. But an antipoverty agency is a rather unique type of state bureaucracy. One could think of at least three kinds of street-level state bureaucrats: those that are part of the criminal justice arm of the state (such as the police); those that carry out the most neutral administrative tasks of the state (such as the department of motor vehicles); and those that are part of the welfare dimension of the state, into which the agents of Zacka’s antipoverty agency fit. I am persuaded by the argument that all these bureaucrats behave like moral agents and enjoy a space of discretion, as Zacka suggests; additionally, the book’s engagement with other qualitative analyses of bureaucracies expands the set of empirical observations. Nonetheless, I wonder whether some of the observations of the book might be colored by the experience of working in one of the ‘kinder’ arms of the state. Could it be that some



bureaucratic pathologies are field-specific and that enforcers are more frequently found in the policing arm of the state? Tellingly, throughout the book, Zacka refers to the citizens (and non-citizens) who resort to the state as ‘clients.’ This, of course, makes sense when thinking about the dynamics of an antipoverty agency, but would one speak of ‘clients’ when thinking about those arrested or interrogated by the police? Perhaps the regular displays of care and kindness that Zacka observed are partly the product of the environment of an antipoverty non-profit. Similarly, the scope and distribution of the plurality of views represented in each bureaucracy are probably field-specific.

Second, Zacka explains that, contrary to popular perceptions, of the three pathologies that he identifies, indifference is not the only one that is widespread (p. 121). But isn’t indifference still the *most* prevalent of the three pathologies, much more frequently encountered than caregiving and enforcement? If not, what then explains the enduring perception of indifference as the archetypal bureaucratic evil? To be sure, perceptions are, by definition, subjective, but when widely shared across time and space they convey an experience that should not be discarded as merely misguided. It is not that a thousand persons frustrated by their rigid interactions with bureaucrats cannot be wrong. Zacka compellingly argues that their perceptions are an unfair representation of the space for bureaucrats’ moral agency. And yet, explaining the source of the discrepancy between the hackneyed stereotype of the bureaucrat and the variety of pathologies analyzed in the book would be very interesting. Why are our perceptions so wrong? Is it simply that we fail to perceive enforcers and caregivers as the product of the organization itself? Or is it that the indifferent abound? The proliferation of indifference would not be at odds with the discussion of the fifth chapter, ‘Impossible Situations.’ As rules proliferate and overlap, pulling bureaucrats towards opposing poles and conflicting demands, some might just give into indifference and defeatism. Perhaps, in the manner of Auyero (2012), whom Zacka mentions in a footnote, the façade of indifference can itself be a strategy of the state. Perhaps, as democratic states create increasingly complex bureaucracies that divide tasks and jurisdictions – not unlike Fordist chains of production – indifference becomes a looming threat (though indifferent bureaucrats are not exclusive to democracies). Or perhaps kind and caring bureaucrats are understood as humane exceptions by clients, mere oddities in the sea of bureaucratic indifference. In such cases, kindness might be perceived to lie in a sympathetic bureaucrat’s decision to bend some rules – instead of the manifestation of the space for discretion and agency afforded by the bureaucracy itself. One might then nod in gratitude at the individual bureaucrat, while leaving intact one’s frustration with the state. Whether that is desirable or not is in itself worth discussing, but if theorists seek to better understand the demands of a democratic state, the ways in which the state is perceived by citizens and *why* matters.



My last point is a suggestion for further research. Although the book is specifically concerned with the workings of a democratic state, applying Zacka's analytical insights and concerns to authoritarian bureaucracies (and to the perceptions that citizens have of them) would be quite revealing. A discussion of moral agency in authoritarianism might provide an interesting counterpart to elucidate when behavior is *perceived* to cross the thin line between legally bound discretion and arbitrariness. The boundary between the two is crucial if one thinks about it through the lens of freedom understood as non-domination. After all, the democratic state at the core of Zacka's book is, theoretically, not only one that seeks to guarantee equal and fair treatment, but it is also one that is concerned with freedom and with shielding citizens from having and perceiving their fate subjected to the will of another. Is bureaucratic moral agency perceived to strengthen or threaten freedom?

In sum, Zacka's remarkable book opens up many intriguing questions and will hopefully be one of many future studies that combine the virtues of an ethnographic approach and normative political theory.

## Reference

Auyero, J. (2012). *Patients of the State: The Politics of Waiting in Argentina*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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