

The third, but by no means smallest, of the challenges a biography author faces is the need to get to know the personality of their protagonist. Before Thompson used the badger to represent Nixon he scrutinised the way this small, furry animal lives. Ledvai could have used football metaphors for the same end: if there was one thing that could have helped in the sketching of Orbán's personality it was football. Instead of the disenchanting expert lingo of expensively-clothed technocrats, Orbán offered—via emotions and images one could identify with—the idea of the football-loving ordinary man, with which he won somewhat more than 30 per cent of the voters' hearts and ballots. In the Hungarian voting system, this was enough for a qualified majority, which then led to the establishment of the NER. Despite increasingly common corruption cases and international criticisms, Orbán seems to be retaining this majority—at least this is what was predicted before the election of 8 April when this review was written.

Not much more than a decade has passed since Thompson's legendary obituary in which he wrote: 'Nixon was a professional politician, and I despised everything he stood for—but if he were running for president this year against the evil Bush–Cheney gang, I would happily vote for him.' This shows well that it can always get worse when it comes to the vulnerability of the institutional system of liberal democracy. Reading Ledvai's book, one may come to the conclusion that if his analysis of the present regime is correct, then it might not be too pessimistic to assume there will be a time when we will long for Orbán, a not untalented politician, to be back.

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## Street bureaucrats: not so faceless

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*When the State Meets the Street: Public Service and Moral Agency*, by Bernardo Zacka. Harvard University Press. 320 pp. £27.95.

Bureaucrats get a bad rap, both in our political culture, and in everyday life. 'Faceless

bureaucracies' full of 'red tape' generating 'inefficiency' are staples of cheap political rhetoric. Yet such rhetoric resonates, at least in part, because most citizens' interactions with bureaucrats are at best entirely forgettable, and at worst the source of anger, frustration, and even humiliation, should we fail to access the services that we believe ourselves entitled to. For most of us, it is through interactions with 'street level' bureaucrats—public-facing civil servants of all descriptions, including police officers, teachers, health workers, and so on—that the abstract state becomes a concrete reality. Street level bureaucracies systematically condition our lives. Yet experience of them is rarely that of positive reinforcement.

In political theory, bureaucrats have not fared much better. The most influential account remains Max Weber's vision from the early twentieth century, according to which state bureaucracies are giant machines, rigidly commanded from the top down. For Weber, crucial to the effective functioning of bureaucratic structures was the removal of discretion on behalf of the human agents that staffed them. On this view, individual bureaucrats were themselves essentially automata, unthinkingly following orders received from above: essentially, mere tools for the implementation of policy as envisioned by a separate class of political leaders.

Against these prevailing views comes Bernardo Zacka's *When the State Meets the Street*. An examination of street level bureaucracy rooted in anthropological fieldwork, but with the philosopher's toolkit dexterously deployed, it announces the author as a major new voice. For it is Zacka's contention that street level bureaucrats are anything but automata. On the contrary, they are necessarily and permanently imbued with a wide range of discretionary powers, required on a daily basis to make constant choices about how to administer the policies of the state. Such choices, he shows, have an enormous impact, not only on the lives of those who must interact with the bureaucracy, but on the very coherence of how democratic states can hope to administer themselves.

Take, for example, the caseworkers whom Zacka spent eight months working alongside

at an anti-poverty agency in the north-eastern United States. If confronted with an angry client who had skipped an appointment two days earlier, is the appropriate response to put this person to the back of the queue (as the rules dictate), and thereby administer punishment for their earlier failure—perhaps encouraging future self-discipline? Or does one squeeze them in, knowing from past experience that this client has a particularly difficult home situation? Does one go yet further, and make time out of official hours to see them, because their need is so great? But if so, what about all the other clients also on the wait-list, who are being quiet and polite—and so are easier to ignore? Think, alternatively, of the policeman who has to decide which car to pull over when four drivers were speeding through the trap (especially if he noticed which weren't white). Or the teacher who has to decide how much to meet one's superiors' demands for students to average well on the standardised tests, whilst feeling a commitment to help both the weakest and brightest in the class, who each need different kinds of attention.

About such discretion—and these examples barely scratch the surface—Zacka makes a series of points. The discretionary judgement of street level bureaucrats is a deep, and ultimately ineliminable, feature of the implementation of public policy, yet it is almost entirely neglected by academic political theorists. This is damning, for as Zacka's analysis shows, street level bureaucrats are effectively engaged in the daily construction of public policy as it manifests in the real world. If political theorists aspire to theorise adequately what it means for a legitimate state to rule in the name of justice (as so many of them purport to), then the lack of attention paid to street level bureaucracy is embarrassing.

There is a great deal of evaluative theoretical work to do here. Given that street level bureaucrats are essential to the implementation of public policy, major questions of democratic accountability arise. Who, after all, gives bureaucrats the authority to make their discretionary choices? And if we can't eliminate discretion (and Zacka persuasively argues that we can't, and indeed

shouldn't want to, due to the complex and valuable moral reasoning bureaucrats bring to bear), what kind of institutional and cultural conditions should we aim to create? And which of these can we reflectively endorse?

It will not do to try and pass the buck to political scientists, with theorists claiming that street level bureaucracy is about 'implementation', and therefore cut off from normative questions about the justice of state policies. Zacka correctly points out that the implementation is the policy. He correspondingly calls for a more 'ground-up' theory of the state, beginning in part with how bureaucracies actually function. The result is a rousing call to all those who are serious about evaluating politics in all of its grubby complexity.

This alone would be a major contribution, but Zacka also offers compelling considerations of what it is like to be a street level bureaucrat. Adopting an ethnographic perspective combined with a subtle use of moral philosophising, he considers the diverse pressures and demands made on such individuals. Not only the tasks that they must fulfil, but their self-conceptions as agents, many of whom identify with their work as a vocation entailing special moral demands. What emerges is a kaleidoscope of ethical experience: of the pathologies individuals can fall into while being bent out of shape by conflicting moral and professional demands; of the 'gymnastics of the self' they can use to try and cope; of the tragedies that can result from the genuinely impossible situations in which street level bureaucrats are often placed.

The result is a book that blends insights from political theory, moral philosophy, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and literature. It is interdisciplinary in the truest sense: aware that the boundaries of the modern academy are contingent constructs, and that whilst each 'field' can offer useful tools, it is only by attempts to work through the complexity of human life on its own terms that we will stand any chance of understanding it. The result is a model to aspire to—and a challenge to the rest of us to do better.

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