

***Beyond Service:
State Workers, Public Policy, and the Prospects for Democratic
Administration***

Greg McElligott
Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001

Reviewed by Kiran Mirchandani

In his 2001 publication, McElligott makes a cogent and insightful argument about the ways that front-line workers have been largely ignored in studies of policy-making and the state. The book is divided into three parts. In the first part, McElligott provides a detailed description of the history of the public service in Canada and the theories which have been used to make sense of the developments that have occurred. In particular, he argues that the street-level bureaucracy theory fails to clarify the distinctions between the interests of managers, front-line workers and clients. The second part, consists of a case study of the employment services branch of Employment and Immigration Canada (EIC) and its union, the Canada Employment and Immigration Union (CEIU). Focusing on intradepartmental struggles, McElligott reveals the uneasy combination of coercive labour market policies, target-based conceptions of service, trendy management theories and collective action. The co-existence of these trends creates “space for resistance” specifically through the unique nature of the relationship between front-line workers and their clients. McElligott notes that “these relationships, whether

individually or collectively engaged, can undermine the integrity of the bureaucratic hierarchy and foster progressive forms of resistance” (162). The final part of the book focuses on the ways in which front-line workers’ mundane resistance can be linked to a progressive project of achieving a deeper democracy. He terms the on-going challenges front-line workers pose to hierarchical control as “a slow grinding heroism” which can be characterized as “mundane resistance.” While much of this resistance is invisible, it has nevertheless been central in the policy struggles of the neoconservative era in Canada. McElligott notes that front-line workers are likely to be attracted to transformative projects if they involve an expansion of their discretionary decision-making power. McElligott suggests that expanded state unions and client-worker coalitions, such as public service councils, are ways to provide a vehicle for the development of progressive democratic administration.

McElligott’s book represents an important and timely contribution. At the same time, the book points to the urgent need for a number of other projects which would further our understanding of the important role of resistance amongst front-line workers, particularly in light of the racialized and gendered nature of this labour force and the clients they serve. For example, McElligott provides a number of examples of “resistance,” such as engagement in ongoing challenges to hierarchical control, formation of coalitions and use of discretionary decision-making in processing claims. To make sense of the gendered and racialized nature of these examples, it would be useful to draw on the rich literature on “resistance” which has existed for some time in feminist, critical and poststructural theory (examples include Bordo, Butler, Foucault, Gramsci, Jermier, Groves and Chang, Prasad, Abu-Lughod). Some feminist theorists, for example, have argued that there are dangers associated with treating resistance as a homogeneous and inclusive category. Others note the need to develop conceptions of resistance that do not characterize the subject as either victim or heroine; this romanticization of resistance can obscure power relations. The relationship between power and resistance is a complex one; whereby resistant and hegemonic norms can be connected in various ways. These debates could allow for a further analysis of the resistance of front-line EIC. The attempt to conceptualize resistance could also be complemented with further analysis of the ways in which front-line workers themselves define and give meaning to their actions.

While the case study of the employment services branch allows McElligott to propose a number of innovative possibilities for transforming public service administration, the limited discussion of the immigration branch suggests that a comparison between the two branches is key. McElligott notes in his conclusion that a further integration of analyses of race and gender would have provided a “richer narrative” than the one provided. Some of the discussion in the book suggests, however, that such an integration may, in fact, have provided a *different*

narrative. For example, a strong argument is made about the need for the expansion of the discretionary decision-making abilities of front-line workers to facilitate the democratization of state services. The brief discussion of front-line workers in the immigration branch, however, corroborate the findings of numerous other studies which document that many workers direct their frustrations about workloads towards their clientele. Also, many believe that refugee claims are bogus and process them according to this belief.

While McElligott stresses the potential of the CIEU and other unions to mobilize front-line workers towards progressive ends, the description of the views and actions of the CIEU do not suggest much willingness to confront racism amongst front-line workers and other members. Instead, while recognizing that workers are not always sympathetic to clients in the immigration branch, union officials attribute this to the “organizational enforcement culture” rather than to racism (it is very likely both). If McElligot’s project is the development of a progressive, non-sexist, anti-racist, democratic public service, it is imperative to include an analysis of how front-line workers’ discretionary decision-making power is not exclusively directed towards increased democracy . Rather, it can and does contribute and extend unequal and unjust social relations. Resolving these contradictory positions is key to the building of socially just public services. In moving us towards this goal, this book represents an invaluable contribution.