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*Sense of the State from a Different Perspective: Doing Critical Ethnography on Regional Public Employees in Italy*

*Working document: Plan of the paper*

## **Introduction**

State as a study object can be observed and understood under manifold disciplinary approaches. Among the variety of existing perspectives, the study of ordinary relationship to public power can provide insight into the notion of state.

In this paper I'll present and discuss the **importance of street level bureaucrats in redefining the notion of statehood**, and also how working conditions in a **New Public Management-oriented context can influence** (and hamper) **the practices** of the employees in a regional institution.

In my research, statehood is seen through the making of a state; meaning that, rather than discussing public power models, this paper shows how public employees "shape the state" concretely through everyday practices, which also influence how users of public service perceive the "state – in – action".

This paper also shows how Emilia-Romagna Region employees not only shape state authority through "grounded performance" but also **build their own "idea of state"** (Abrams 1988), slightly different from the values of the institutional discourse.

The **first chapter** of this article will present an overview of relevant research questions and hypotheses. The **second chapter** is a review of relevant literature. In the **third chapter**, I'll explain in detail how my conceptual framework mobilizes the literature, to move on to **the fourth chapter**, with a brief insight onto my research methodology and its implications in cross-cutting debates, and a presentation of relevant findings. In the **fifth chapter** I'll discuss relevance, interest and implications of my findings to the questions, to draw my conclusion in the final chapter.

## **1. Research hypotheses and questions**

Leading hypotheses in my research, and the questions discussed in this paper, are the following:

**1) regional employees are street level bureaucrats**, even though they do not always work daily at a counter or implement programs and projects instead of providing social services. They are the performing **interface**

**of the public power** in many policy fields; and they see themselves as policy professionals and gatekeepers of public interest.

**2) regional employees use political discretion** in policy implementation, when there's a space for that because of indeterminacy of policy. To deal with that indeterminacy is, according to Gilles Jeannot, **the core** of their job. This means for the employees to be **able to rethink policy as policymakers do**.

**Policymaking** as a performance of the state in front of users and citizens **changes the societal perception of statehood**. However, what policymaking means varies significantly according to the subjacent values; and values in official discourse do not correspond to what public workers think. Consequently, **what "policymaking" means to the employees influence their performance of the state**.

**3) when New Public Management** theories were adopted by the regional managers, for the employees it **was a disaster**. Of course, even previously they had experienced many problems and difficulties throughout their careers, but when recurrent reorganizations started to happen in Emilia-Romagna Region organization, **working conditions dramatically worsened**. Consequently, **the role public employees play in society has been annihilated**. How the employees reacted to this situation has become one of my central questions of research and is therefore relevant to how they manage to shape public authority. In fact, since public interest is what they chose to serve, they are confronted with neoliberal discourse to do what they think as their "good job".

## **2. Literature review**

**Relevant conceptions of State** (alternatives to classical political science debate on state): Pierre Clastres (1987) affirms that state may not be just a way to regulate violence, as in traditional Weberian definition, but may be the origin of it. D. Graeber in his footsteps criticizes structural violence of state in bureaucracy, as Gupta (2006) does.

A turning point is the theoretical contribution of Pierre Bourdieu, who reconceptualized the state as a main factor to construct social reality\_mobilizing the notions of "symbolic capital", "bureaucratic capital", « champ du pouvoir » and "champ bureaucratique".

In the footsteps of Mary Douglas (1986) focus on institutions from a cultural perspective, Irène Bellier (1997) conceived institutions as cultural entities. Marc Abélès (1990, 1997) works provided an in-depth study of what globalization makes to the concept of state, power, introducing concepts such as imbrication of politics in society (there's always a link between politics and society, in every society).

Talal Assad (2004) reflected on the margins of the state as a starting point to think of the state itself in a globalized world. In the same work, Veena Das and Deborah Poole questioned the definition of the state in terms of centralized control over a determinate territory.

Didier Fassin (2008) invited to understand politics through social anthropology to challenge political science ethnocentrism. In Fassin's view, the anthropological contribution is "decisive" to rethink and reformulate the notions of politics and statehood.

Jean Leca (2012) conceptualized the state from a double perspective, the state-being (*statology*) and the state-making, also providing definitions for politics, policies, and polity, as categories to analyze power performance based on the distinction between government and governance. In his vision, state is a product of social conflicts and can be observed from different disciplinary angles (political science, political sociology, and policy analysis), so raising a debate between *state-oriented VS society-oriented theories*.

### ***State and policy***

The definition of *action publique* made by the French sociologist Pierre Lascoumes structured an interdisciplinary research area around what Harold Laswell called in 1936 "policy science" (theory of rational choice, focusing on governance models). Lascoumes reflects about a "pentagon of public action", meaning that the making of a policy can be analyzed through asymmetric relations among 5 aspects: actors, results, institutions, representations and processes.

Christine Musselin (2005) enlightens two contrasting approaches to public policies. The first one, used by political scientists, is inspired by rationality and hierarchy; policy is a tool to study state and its actors. The second one, developed by sociologists of organizations, focuses on gaps in public programs' implementation. Nevertheless, in her vision it's clear the lack of a "third way" to approach the making of state under the perspective of its own makers, public employees. This avenue of research refers directly to the foundational works of Michael Lipsky (1980) on street level bureaucrats and the role they play in the state authority's performance.

The **anthropology of organisations**, as a sub-discipline with focus on performative side of state, was theorized by Cris Shore and Susan Wright (1997), who later made a proposal to set out "Policy as a new field of anthropology" and to work on the "**Anthropology of public policy**" (Shore, Wedel, 2005). This research, however, reveals the need of going beyond the observations of the organizations to investigate "people working in organizations", which is **anthropology in public policy** (Dubois, 2015). Also, Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2013) reflected about relation between embeddedness and informal norms in his *Institutionalisms and anthropology* and about challenges posed by anthropology of public policy. His approach is near mine concerning the need to pay attention to public employees' role in the making of the state.

2012 was the birthdate of the French journal *Gouvernement et action publique*, which gave a **multidisciplinary, cross-cutting perspective** to research on government in a broader sense, including the notions of state, institution, and policy implementation.

### ***Relational perspectives of state***

The **relational perspective** in research focusing on state performance, clearly connected to my research approach, is showcased in the “stategraphy” studies (Thelen, Benda-Beckmann, and Vetter, 2014), in opposition to the *statology* of Leca. *Stategraphy* is a way to understand statehood through practices and representations, by focusing on relational modalities, boundary work, and forms of embeddedness of actors as constitutive factors, so enabling a richer understanding of power.

In the same direction, Vincent Dubois showed (2015) how, although policy analysis and ethnography remain linked together in various relational theoretical currents, they keep open anyhow the debate on many issues, such as applied anthropology VS fundamental ethnography, people-centered VS policy-centered ethnography. He argues that **policy ethnography can be critical**, meaning that its main function **should be transformative** in relation to the *status quo* of policy observed.

This kind of approach is shared by several researchers (Wedel, Shore, Lathrop and Feldman, Thelen) who work on the encounter between ethnography and policy, trying to contribute to the debate on power from a relational perspective, using **political ethnography** as Mazouz, Avanza, and Pudal recently did (2024).

Other studies questioned directly the notion of public anthropology in itself and in relation to the notion of **engaged anthropology** (Dubois, 2015; Fassin, 2008; Ortner, 2018; Besteman, 2013; Consoloni and Quaranta, 2023), to give contributions to the long-lasting debate on axiological neutrality of science.

Overall, the critical approach to policymaking is vital. Studies focus on ethnography of policy settings, agents, practices, organizations and processes, which goes along with qualitative and interpretive approaches to policy studies. They mainly concentrate on welfare and social policies (Dubois 2012, 2015, 2017; Belorgey 2012; Fassin 2017; Boussard, Mercier, and Tripier 2008; Consoloni, Quaranta, Dubois, 2023;) but also on other policy sectors (Fischer *et al.* 2017; Lazar, 2023; Selim, 2018; Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2019; Burawoy 2005; Tarabusi, Zinn, 2023). Also, Janine R. Wedel (2023) stressed the urgent relevance of the anthropology of policy, arguing in favor of a critical approach to policy studies.

### ***State and bureaucracy. From the sociology of organizations to management studies***

M. Crozier (1963) proposed **sociology of organization** as an intellectual tool to study bureaucratic institutions in the cultural context in which they operate, by focusing on structures and processes in policy implementation. This reflection led to new theories such as social regulation, analysis of social networks, lean management, new public management, with the declared intention to overcome the failing “Weberian” institutions through neoliberal reforms. In fact, theories promoting modernization and rationalization in public administration contributed to rethinking the state through a neo-liberal, managerial lens of standardization between private companies and public service.

The **New Public Management theoretical turn** make it explicit the purpose of amending problems of bureaucratic inefficiency by introducing a performance-oriented idea of public administration. The outcome was major, both in terms of negative impacts on the institutions and their workers, and in terms of societal perceptions of state performance. Literature on that theme is abundant, multidisciplinary, and presents conflicting positions: Bachelard, 2020; Bartoli and Blatrix, 2015; Ongaro and Bellé, 2012, 2014, 2021; Bezès, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2023; Bezès and Le Lidec, 2016; Bezès and Musselin, 2015; Boussard, 2015, 2022; Chappoz, 2023; Chopin and Sinigaglia, 2022; Cohard et al., 2021; Collard, 2021; Demazière, 2013; Desmarais, 2016; Georgakakis, 2010; Hibou, 2013; Gilles Jeannot, 2008; Leclainche, 2024; Matyjasik, 2019; Nous, 2021; Paltrinieri, 2016; Pollitt, 2007, 2022; Reiter, 2019; Robert, 2007; Sourie and Ferlazzo, 2023.

Analyses undertaken by **sociologists of administration** focused on rules and how they were used, trying to outline the new “bureaucratic phenomenon” based on numbers, quantification and commensuration (Bezès, 2009). Throughout the years manifold changes in the concepts of bureaucratization and performance-based management happened, as Philippe Bezès (2020) argues, showing how managerial bureaucratic reforms, even though boasting a purpose of reinforcing administrative capacity and pursuing public interest, were not able to provide any evidence about whether they were successful.

On the footsteps of David Graeber critique of neoliberalism as a tool to spread **bureaucratic violence** globally, (2010, 2014, 2015), some very interesting critical studies are available and relevant to my conceptual framework (Nous, 2021; Gupta, 2020). Other studies focus on collateral effects of managerial – neo-liberal notions on administrations and public employees (Matyjasik and Guenoun, 2019) are mobilized in my research. **Managerial discourse harms public workers** even when observed from a clinical sociology approach, which considers limitations in symbolic construction as diminishing of the employees’ role as the main consequences (Vandeveld-Rougale, 2017). Along the same line, Olivier Quéré (2019) argues against the prejudice on the laziness of the civil servants as a major cause of policy inefficiency, one of the main arguments of the NPM theorists.

Éléonor Breton et Gwenaëlle Perrier (2018) also questioned from a public workers’ perspective the **impacts of neo-liberal modernization theories on procedures and practices**. They showed that the multiplication of reorganizations aimed at giving visibility to reforms in themselves was also intended to change employees’ practices but succeeded only partially and in a non-measurable way, while on the other hand, it added further burden to the employees’ tasks.

After a study on the ethnography in bureaucracies, Thomas Bierschenk and Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2021) published a seminal work on the **anthropology of bureaucracy**, a reflexion on ethnographical research on bureaucracies “from the inside”, starting from the recognition of “bureaucracy as a form of domination and oppression as well as of protection and liberation”. In their opinion, the anthropology of bureaucracy should take bureaucrats as the ‘natives’ and acknowledge their agency. They also raised awareness about anthropology’s added value to the study of state, focusing on informal and non-recognized aspects of bureaucracy in a contextualized way.

Finally, some research raises awareness about the existence of **a gap between neoliberal discourse and the reality** of public workers (Bihr, 2018; Holborow, 2015); which brings us back to **research questioning power in public organization in a context of NPM**, always promising performance on the basis of individuals' aspirations and of the euphemizing of power (Boltanski, Chiapello, 1999; Gaulejac, 2005).

### *Employees and NPM*

Concerning **theories developed around public employees in the context of NPM** changes, research most relevant are the works of Gilles Jeannot (2008, 2009), very near to Lipsky's theories, focusing on how employees succeed in dealing with neo managerial constraints in their daily practices by using discretion.

Also, the works of Edoardo Ongaro (Ongaro, 2012, 2016, 2023, 2024) contributed to contextualize the NPM in relation to Italian political and administrative context. In Italy public organizations were exposed to neoliberal trends only later compared to other European countries. Also, the neo-liberal turn in public management was supported by press campaigns led by the government against civil servants, whose laziness was allegedly at the roots of public service failures. This situation worsened dramatically the employees' working conditions, while diminishing their societal role (Vecchi, 2019; Saruis, 2013; Regonini, 2018; Natali, Guardiancich, 2020; Mastinu, 2021, Ongaro; Lucciarini, Rimano and Santurro, 2024; Borriello, 2022; Di Mascio, Natalini, and Feltrin, 2019; Di Mascio, Angeletti, and Natalini, 2021; Di Mascio, 2020; Cuomo and Aimo, 2024; Clarich, 2020; Cianferoni, 2021; Celeste and Rossa, 2020; Cassese, 2019, 2022; Cammelli et al., 2019; Bassoli, Dallara, and Nesti, 2024).

### *The other side of bureaucracy: street level bureaucrats*

Lipsky's foundational book (1980) is a study of the performative side of public authority, providing insight into how **public service workers, using considerable discretion** in the execution of their jobs on the basis of ability and expertise, **play the role of policy decisionmakers**. Also, work conditions and practices of the employees influence the social perception of the state because **they represent the frontlines of government** policy towards the public.

One of crucial points in Lipsky's work is the focus on budgetary and hierarchical constraints on street-level bureaucrats, which impact on quality of public service and also on SLBs practices. In this line, Aggeri (2023) argues against the vulgate of innovation, only one of the "managerial myths", neo-liberal values promoted in the NPM discourse which impact negatively on public institutions and their workers (Vandeveld-Rougale, 2017). Both economic and organizational factors can clearly influence performances, and even employees' perception of their job (Bruyère and Lizé, 2020). Other studies confirm the impacts of managerial discourse on employees' practices and self-representation, under ever-increasing pressures (Nous 2021; Matjasik, Guenoun, 2019; Quéré, 2019).

Lipsky inspired a whole studies tradition (Moore, Hill, Hupe, Watkins-Hayes, Lotta, May, Evans, Piore, Meyers, Smith, Brodtkin, Tummers, Vedung, Buffat, Gofen, Zedekia, Peeters, Chang, Brewer, Campos, Maynard-Moody, Musheno, Bassoli, Nesti, and many others) focusing on public workers to grasp an insight of state from an inside perspective.

What my research add to that tradition is **that my perspective and subjective posture is double**, because of my being an employee in the same organization I study, which is unusual, with the major exception of Gilles Jeannot. The figure of public employee conceptualized by Jeannot (2008, 2009, 2012, 2016, 2019, 2020) is very near to the one in Lipsky's works. He defines bureaucratic job as a *métier flou*, where the indeterminateness of policy opens to the public employee's political creativity in implementation.

### 3. My theoretical framework

My paper is structured around a critical approach to policymaking, in the sense Dubois (2015) gave it, namely the purpose of accounting for social problems from the point of view of people experiencing them in order to present and discuss possible bottom-up alternative proposals.

State studies explore many conceptions of power, according to criteria such as its functions, its institutions, its processes, its limits. My research sits at the intersection of several disciplines focusing on statehood, governance, and power, providing a situated insight into regional policy implementation.

**Anthropology can engender a profound reconceptualization of the notion of statehood;** indeed, this has already been done, for instance, by stategraphy and anthropology of state. My research provides a privileged point of observation of state "in its making", by studying **how civil servants shape public authority** perception through their daily performance and relations, putting in place resilient working strategies in a New Public Management-oriented institution.

If anthropology of policy is deemed to be relevant to state studies even in our days (Shore, Wright, 2023), my research shows how the tradition of anthropology in policy is suitable, in a complementary way, for the same purpose.

New Public Management theories are based on the idea that public service failures can be dealt with only through the adoption of recurrent managerial reforms, which deeply impact on public organizations as well as on public workers. Debate has been raised about whether this produces harm rather than the announced benefits. Studies about "liquid administration" (Colin, 2024), or boasting the benefits, whether real or only expected, of the neo-liberalist theories and their values, (Yousfi and Boutiller, 2024, Vanleene, Voets, and Verschuere 2020), already criticized from a scientific perspective, are questioned in this paper from the public employees' perspective.

The interesting approach of Agnes Vandewelde-Rougale (2017), criticizing devastating effects of the managerial tendencies in public organizations, contributes to the setting up of my conceptual framework. The

focus is on the relation between language, jargon, discourse and representations of self at work. She claims that the **managerial discourse** (the managerial newSpeak! Citing Orwell: ““Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?””) creates in employees not only **psychological distress** leading to depression but also **narrows the imaginary of individuals and diminishes the social symbolic universe**. So, the managerial discourse impacts deeply on workers’ subjective experiences and proposes a dominant frame of reference which influences even what the employees say about their own job and professional practices.

Thus, in Vandeveldel-Rougale work as well as in this paper, **managerial discourse plays a triple role**: ideological (transmitting dominant values to workers), symbolic (as symbols are signs of power), and pragmatic, because it modifies the actors’ behavior internally and externally to the organization. My research adds to this interesting theory by showing not only **how employees represent themselves at work**, but also to what’s **their representation of their institution and the public authority**. The use and meaning of the key concepts varies according to the field, the official discourse or the employees’ statements, revealing different categories of thought in action to think the same object.

### ***Some implications***

The manifold disciplinary frameworks and concepts I mobilize in my research required several phases of comparison among the disciplinary categories of thought of politics and power, starting with the concepts of *statehood* and *policy making*. Also, notions such as bureaucracy, public service, street level bureaucrat, public interest, and so on, needed clarification and adaptation to my research. Contextualizing those key concepts to adapt them to fit in my analysis allowed me to construct the figure of the regional public employee, and to find out the appropriate themes to investigate in the interviews, in which values promoted in the institutional discourse and words the employees use to identify the same ideas were confronted according to the interpretive method.

My unconventional approach shifting from classical notions to socio-anthropological categories influenced and changed my posture as a researcher. The role played by scientific knowledge in relation to political study object, long discussed, became a central reflection (AFA, 2011), as well as the **social and political role of the ethnographer**.

I reflected about the debate between “engaged anthropology” VS “public anthropology”, recently raised among Italian researchers studying state practices “in action” (Tarabusi, 2010, Tarabusi and Zinn, 2023). My research isn’t engaged anthropology – not in the sense given to this notion by Catherine Besteman and Sherry B. Ortner – but rather **public anthropology**, with a critical slant towards political discourse and a clear transformative purpose, through the deconstruction of commonplaces (Consoloni and Quaranta, 2023).

I finally recall the importance to my research posture of having **a double status**, as a policy professional and a policy researcher, which changed significantly both the way I conduct my research and its results. In fact,

several materials in my corpus are issued from my professional experience, as Kate Fox (2004) does. Belonging to the same social group she studies, she argues that exploring the complexities of human cultures only through participant observation has its limitations, and chooses to adopt a “rather uneasy” mix of approaches, including both involvement and detachment.

#### 4. Methodology and empirical analysis

This chapter gives an overview of how my research explore statehood from a **bottom-up, workers’ point of view**. Findings discussed in this article help to tackle power in its performance in a given territory by local policy professionals.

The method I follow for both the fieldwork and the analysis, based on Olivier de Sardan’s qualitative socio-anthropology and on C. Geertz’s interpretive anthropology, focuses on the **relational aspects of public policy** implementation.

The fieldwork draws inspiration to the principles of anthropology of thought, which is bound to understand social reality through the lens of multiple intellectual postures, which position themselves differently in relation to power. The anthropology of thought (Lazarus, 2001) is built around two statements: “*les gens pensent*”, and “*la pensée est rapport du réel*”. Consequently, **subjectivity** is at the center of the investigation, made by searching for breaking points in official discourse. Subjacent to this method is the argument that people’s intellectuality is of non-discursive order; how it breaks through the narrative of official discourse can be investigated by detecting “*mots problématiques*” (polysemic words which open to debate). This allowed me to reflect also on some crucial epistemological questions, such as the problem of the researcher’s status and the role of anthropological knowledge of politics and statehood.

In fact, my research posture is characterized by a “**double reflexivity**”, due to to my double status of street-level bureaucrat and researcher, which call for an engaged posture while raising questions about bias. The fieldwork was based on a long-lasting ethnographic participant observation from the inside of the regional organization, where my colleagues were assigned the double role of experts and interlocutors (therefore consultants and narrators). My own role could also be described, on some occasions, as mostly the same. Dealing with the complexity of this situation represents to my research both a challenge and a resource.

Research draws from various, mixed, sources:

-a long-term **participant observation** run throughout three decades, working as a permanent staff in public authorities since 1996.

-several sets of **qualitative interviews** (semi-directive in 2021-2022, open in 2023-2024), to grasp not only how regional street level bureaucrats influence with their practices the reconfigurations of statehood, but also what they really think about official discourse.

-a set of **exploratory interviews** with politicians, directors, etc., to set out the field framework with as many details as possible and to gather material for case studies

-a long-lasting **documental analysis and archival research**, which includes formal and informal documents, public declarations, press reviews as well as internal organizational plans and memos addressed to the employees, to explore categories used by the public employer.

To compare the institutional discourse to the statements of the employees, I previously selected relevant disciplinary **categories used in policy analysis and/or related to state performance** and find some words I thought of as “problematic” (polysemic). During the interviews I tested with interlocutors those problematic words, to **identify how employees conceptualize state authority through non-discursive categories** (Lazarus). The thought of the employees put in comparison to official discourse brought out ideas from a point of view normally neglected. So, I was able to show how the same **words change meaning** if used in the official vulgate, in the scientific arena, and in the system of sense of the public employees. Those multiple meanings, coming from **different systems of meaning** (Geertz), need interpretation by researchers to rethink the categories of power and domination.

**Macro-themes** proposed in the interviews:

- 1) Questions about their **relation to policy implementation and public authority**. How does it mean to be a public employee? What’s your job’s mission? **What exactly do you do at work?** What’s your professional mission as a civil servant?
- 2) Questions about **professional identity**, and **how they represent themselves in the implementation of policy** How do you think of yourself as a worker of the public administration? And how in your opinion evolved the role of the public employees in Italy recently? Questions about their **professional relations with politicians and interaction among colleagues** (auto-representation of their internal role in the policy making process and in the organization they work for)
- 3) Questions about their societal role and how they think has changed in response to NPM changes and negative press campaigns?
- 3) Questions about **challenges and constraints of NPM, and resilience strategies** put in place by the employees. How are the NPM ideas impacting on the implementation of the policies and your role towards society? How do you see the relation between bureaucrats and politicians in your institution? And concerning the career and professional growth expectations? And so on -
- 4) Questions about the relation of policy implementation multilevel dimension. Questions about their daily tasks, do they change depending on the policy level (EU, national, local) or not? How precisely? Are there any differences in being a public employee in a region or in an EU-level institution? How do you see the concept of local dimension of a policy? And the **notion of space, territory**, what do they mean to you as a worker in a public institution?

### ***Relevant findings***

Some of the findings are proposed for discussion in this paper. Indeed, since the focus of this paper is on a specific practice of the state with a bottom-up approach, the understanding of subjective postures and practices of the workers who perform the state is relevant to state studies.

Here below I'll focus on some of those findings, which enlighten how public employees deal with managerial constraints at work, how they re-elaborate in an original way the official discourse "values" putting forward their own idea of what's a "good policy"; and finally, how their role in the making of the state can contribute to reshaping statehood.

**1- Regional public employees see themselves as policy professionals** more than simple executors.

Therefore, to them it's crucial to acquire expertise in many fields; on the contrary, they do not care about managerial skills, the only ones of worth for the direction. Employees **think managerial skills aren't strictly related to job quality** and even think that the latter are an obstacle to the quality of the outcome [Example: when working in international working groups, they feel they are more recognized than inside the region, mostly because of expertise acquired outside the organization and worth of pride.] [Ex.: asked about his role in dealing with strange requests from politicians, he responds he is **a gatekeeper of public interest** mainly because of his expertise in sectorial policy] [Ex.: asked about relations with politicians, she says that often they ask things not feasible and even not legal, so it's her duty to warn politicians about that.]

**2-** They think that their support is often necessary to implement a "**good policy**", and that a succeeding policy is one whose goal is common good, **public or general interest**, but also protection and support to weaker people and minorities. They are aware about the **discretion** it takes to them to adapt, amend, integrate an inappropriate policy, and even about how difficult tasks they spontaneously take on for the sake of the public interest, such as evaluation and rethinking failing policies as best as they can. **They often work beyond organizational limits, in a liminal space between implementation and political decisions.** They even may accept sacrificing their careers and recognition for the benefit of public interest. [Ex.: They affirm that their mission is "public good", "public interest", "common interest", and that often the policy does not satisfy in full the public interest, and in that case it's their duty to modify it] [Ex.: asked about why he is at the bottom of hierarchy after so many years and a high level expertise, he responds that he choose to stay at the bottom and do his favourite job, the one for which he had studied, instead of being promoted to direction of his unit without possibility to "concretely implement the policy"]

**3- The new managerial turn** in Emilia-Romagna region began in 2017, when a new HR director arrived and imposed an NPM-oriented comprehensive strategy. Since then, eight reorganizations in roles, hierarchies, definitions, communication and documentation fluxes, have happened so far, making it impossible for the employees to plan their career nor to adapt their working practices to **new rules, which the employees think irrational and inconsistent to public mission.** They judge the new organizational measures as irrationally

punitive. In the interviews they explain **how they try to cope** with their diminished social status using resilience strategies at work, and how their practices disclose **their own ideas of statehood, policymaking, and public interest**. [Ex.: she is the boss in a Unit with wide experience, she is enraged to the direction because the unit badly needed new technical figures, and they hired only economist in a unit dealing to geology] [Ex.: she affirms that to work in international groups of EU projects an employee needs to train himself outside the region because the region does not care about professionalism of its workers, and if they want to succeed and be recognized, they must get expertise outside the region]

d) Since public employees' job is to implement the best possible policy, and they know by professional experience what's is a "good policy", **they feel that they should have a say on whether a policy is the "good one"**.

## 5. Discussion

This paper adds to the knowledge on statehood from the margins of the state in the sense that the focus is not on state "structures", but rather on practices and postures of bureaucrats – **those who perform the state**.

1) Concerning the first group of questions, about professional identity and self-perception of public employees. The employees I study are an intermediary professional figure in their organization, between the operative counter employee and the political decision maker. Nevertheless, they fall within the concept of street level bureaucrat of Lipsky, and their job their job can be included in Jeannot's definition of public work, "*métier flou*". Providing public service is difficult to define, and requires many abilities, cross-cutting competences, skills, and a great deal of autonomy, the **discretion** as M. Lipsky call it.

My research uses the notions of "caring of policy", "indeterminateness of the civil servant' job –, and creativeness in the policy implementation actually engage problematic questioning in relation to Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*. Nevertheless, regional employees represent themselves as follows: internally to the organization, as policy professional with a cross-cutting expertise, and in front of politicians and as gatekeepers of public interest; externally to the institutions, they are an interface of state in front of citizens; and as workers overall, they act as policymakers and not simple executors of policy.

Those employees deal every day with **controversial dynamics**, such as the conflict between technical expertise and political decision-making, the hierarchical issues VS the new managerial theories in the organization, the problematic relation to the citizens, towards whom **they often represent the only power interface** they could rely on.

By using their discretion, public employees evaluate, amend and even modify the policymaking. Their job is not only implementation of policy decisions; they also can propose political alternatives and can express **their own idea of statehood**, which my paper compares to institutional discourse.

Also, they think that quality in public service is not a managerial asset to be dealt with in a quantitative, performance-oriented way, but depends mainly on devotion to public interest that they display in daily practices. The paper thus enlightens the existence of a profound **discrepancy** between employees thought and NPM theories about what public authority should be.

2) Concerning the questions about what's a **“good policy”** (and consequently what's a “good state”) for the public employees, this paper provides real examples of how they try to concretize their idea of “good” state through “good” policy practices, by **balancing political discretion and daily tasks** and hierarchical relations. The **crucial role of public employees** is very clearly showed in the works of Olivier de Sardan and Blundo on informal administration in Africa. The paper shows how regional employees use discretion in policy implementation following their own ideas of **“good policy”, corresponding to “good job” to them**, and based on the leading idea of public interest.

3) Finally, concerning the questions around working conditions in NPM-oriented institutions and their influences on policy implementation practices, my paper provide ample evidence on damages and constraints neoliberal theories make not only to public service, but mostly to public workers, as individuals whose practices “make the state” in society. Role, status, careers, ideas and practices are upset and impact on the same idea of public interest, commons, public good. **Employees criticize** NPM-oriented organization of **the region** under many aspects, namely:

- **As an employer**, the institution mortifies career expectations, doesn't care about the training and skills of workers, apart from organizational ones, doesn't recognize any professionalism except that of managers, doesn't encourage nor quality neither autonomy in practices, creating stressing working conditions. Employees suffer from dematerialisation of relationships rather than of documents, which hampers relationships, which they think crucial to work in the best way possible.
- Consequently, employees reproach the region, **as a power representative into society**, because of its inconsistency to public mission it should pursue, of its irrationality in management, of the uncertainty it generates through continual reorganizations and inorganic layers of rules. State becomes again the Leviathan, open to corruption, bound to punish and control but not to support, protect and accompany citizens, because the ultimate goal is quantitative performance and not the public interest. Naturally, their vision differs profoundly from the official one.

To conclude, this paper shows how in the employees mind the regional institution is imagined. They think that the region is “blind to its workers” because it disregards the role played by employees in policymaking and also is “blind to people” because it's not attentive to societal needs, in the effort to maintain the focus only on quantitative performance instead of society expectations.

## **Conclusion**

State studies can be defined as a vast field of research at the intersection of many disciplines, such as political science, management studies, and anthropology. The notion of state reflects the ordinary relation to power and can be understood from a manifold point of view, as well as in diachronic dimension.

Critical studies of public policies are in complementarity to existing classical knowledge on statehood, also offering a necessary transformative perspective. My research, based on an ethnographic approach, focuses on a street level group of public workers, aiming to grasp their idea of state through their daily practices.

This article shows **the importance of street level bureaucrats in policymaking** (state performance), which deconstruct and reconstruct the notion of statehood through daily practices (embeddedness).

It also shows **how public employees represent themselves as policy professionals**, whose expertise in policymaking shapes **a contextualized system of meaning**, which is a cultural know-how shared among the employees about power, public service, bureaucracy, and state. They also can **contribute individually to shaping the state authority** through their daily practices, using ample discretion to influence policy implementation.

The results discussed in the paper show that regional public employees, dealing daily with constraints of the managerial discourse and failing political decisions, use their **discretion and expertise** to shape state authority. The role they play in policymaking being the same as Lipsky's street level bureaucrats, their representation of state is relevant to CFP, providing unusual insight into perceptions and postures of street-level state makers.

The paper also contributes to theoretical discussion points:

- on the research overall approach, which studies imbrication (Abélès) of politics into social reality through a critical lens (according to the "critical policy ethnography" studies more than the U.S. related tradition of "applied anthropology") to **deconstruct power discourse commonplaces through identifying social problems from the point of view of people.**
- about the strong **interdisciplinarity** of the research, drawing concepts from classical theories in political science, administration, policy studies, anthropology of thought, **to set up an adapted conceptual frame**, and merging it to disciplines such as clinical sociology to reflect on perverse effects of managerial "newSpeak" on workers' imaginary and even individuals' self-consciousness as valuable workers and professionals.
- about the focus of research, which isn't on organizations, institutions, systems, or processes, but rather **on street level bureaucrats' practices, relations, role, postures, and on how they deal with managerial discourse and constraints.**
- on the implications for seminal debate on the role of science and production of knowledge on the state and politics; and consequently, on the role of **researcher as an author and as an interpreter** of local systems of meaning.

As previously shown, my research offers some elements for reflection about statehood, and public power, its boundaries, and transformation dynamics, as workers of public sector see them. To explore the public employees' postures towards policymaking - that is, towards what they regard as their main duty – gave me the opportunity to **explore statehood performance “from the inside”**, and from an expert's perspective.

My research adds to the existing knowledge about how people see the state, suggesting that **the notion of statehood can be enriched through the knowledge of collective thought construction**. Cultural contexts and local systems of sense can play a decisive role in this construction; and public employees, being part of the same professional network share the same values and play a very important role as **local gatekeepers of public interest**.

This paper contributes to study the perverse effects of the “modernization passwords of the state” on the public agents, as Perrier and Breton (2018) call the managerial turn in public organizations. The current situation of increasing **constraints on public employees hampers quality in public service and worsens the societal perception of state**, requiring immediate reactions to overcome the “organizational blindness” towards public workers (Boussard, Mercier, and Tripier 2008), which annihilates the societal role of street level bureaucrats.

To conclude, this paper's evidence confirms that the results-oriented governance methods, by engaging a categorization of social reality “by quantitative indicators”, exacerbate the formal nature of the neo-liberal bureaucracy towards a “privatized bureaucratization”, which harms the social representation of statehood (Hibou, 2012, Ferlazzo, 2022).

The critical dimension of anthropological knowledge of the state is the key to display contradictions and clashes produced by the social system, otherwise generally invisible or even hidden by the official discourse (Wedel *et al.* 2005; AFA, 2011 Consoloni and Quaranta, 2023), with a clear transformative purpose.