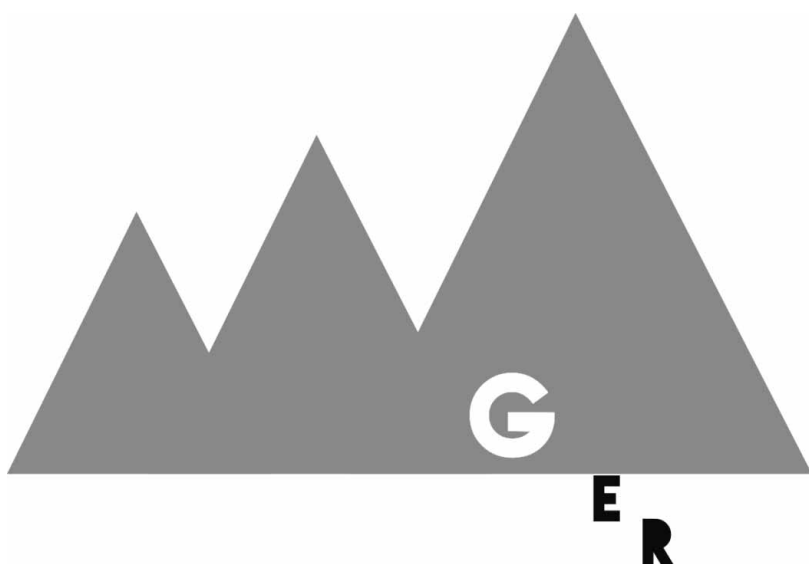


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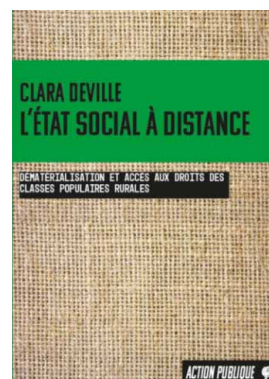
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L'état social à distance. Dématérialisation et accès aux droits des classes populaires rurales.

Clara Deville

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Non-take-up of a social benefit, the *Revenu de Solidarité Active* (RSA), is estimated to affect almost a third of eligible households in France every three months. Moreover, non-take-up affect a fifth of them over a period of three consecutive three-month periods. Clara Deville presents the findings of an in-depth investigation into the inequalities surrounding access to this particular social benefit, RSA, combining ethnographic approaches to both working-class populations and institutional help-desk. Between 2014 and 2017, Deville conducted interviews with 38 individuals prior to their formal engagement with institutions and their assignment of legal statuses (such as that of RSA recipient). Simultaneously, she carried out interviews and observations at the front desks of institutions responsible for social rights, speaking with caseworkers before and after meetings with applicants, and accessing administrative files (with participants' consent). The research took place in the *Pays du Libournais*, a rural area in the east of the Gironde department (Nouvelle-Aquitaine region), defined here in its administrative sense as a territory comprising several cantons.

Initially focused on the issue of non-take-up, the investigation gradually broadened to consider the trajectories through which individuals access social benefits. The study highlights the numerous barriers—administrative, social, cognitive, and psychological—that delay or even prevent individuals from securing their entitlement to the RSA. Deville seeks not only to identify these obstacles but also to probe the deeper reasons why individuals might forgo their rights.

The first chapter traces the historical context of public service digitalization in France, noting a marked shift during the 2010s. Reforms to minimum income schemes initiated in 2012 purported to enhance access to rights. Initially designed to optimize internal administrative processes, digital tools became instruments in the fight against non-take-up, embedded into the systems intended to facilitate benefit access. These digital interfaces were tasked with simplifying and streamlining exchanges between citizens and the state. Yet, while digitization may benefit some eligible applicants, it acts as a barrier for others—particularly those furthest from bureaucratic norms. The study reveals the detrimental effects of digital administration on access to rights for the most precarious individuals, especially in rural areas. The challenges are numerous—geographic, sociocultural, cognitive, and psychosocial—and are often exacerbated by the distance imposed by digital platforms that are designed to supposedly "simplify" the process.

The second chapter explores the institutional logics underlying the categorization of non-take-up in the Gironde *département* (in which the *Pays du Libournais* is located). Deville shows how the label of "non-take-up" is strategically deployed in power struggles between institutions. It enables the transfer of responsibilities for benefit access support beyond the remit of social welfare agencies. The *Conseil Départemental* (county council) assumes politically rewarding tasks related to employability and integration of RSA recipients, while Family Allowance Funds (*Caisses d'Allocation Familiales* - CAF) and Agricultural Social Mutual Funds (*Mutualité Sociale Agricole* - MSA) claim jurisdiction over the legal processing of benefits. Meanwhile, the task of guiding applicants through the process is delegated to peripheral actors such as public service centres, municipal social action centres, or non-profits whose missions are often unrelated to welfare support. In this way, non-take-up becomes a sorting mechanism, producing a selective distribution of access.

Subsequent chapters zoom in on individual trajectories and the paths people must traverse to access their entitlements. Chapter three investigates how territorial

inequalities relegate individuals to the socio-spatial condition of "rural". By this, Deville means positions of socio-spatial domination. She shows that spatial practices shape relationships to social assistance but also variations in access to localised resources. Distances to rights are not experienced equally; they vary depending on one's position in the local social space. The lengthening of trajectories toward RSA access is linked to the way administrative territories are designed and implemented. Centralized, urban-oriented service centres reinforce socio-spatial divides by placing welfare administration in dominant, often inaccessible locations. This chapter's rich ethnographic detail subverts the dominant administrative model of territorial accessibility, showing that this model filters applicants based on their capacity to conform to institutional expectations and geography. Those with fewer spatial resources experience institutions as largely beyond reach.

The fourth and final chapter turns to everyday administrative practices, examining how they unfold both inside and outside formal institutions. Deville demonstrates that individuals with greater economic, social, and cultural capital navigate the system more swiftly, often accessing the RSA directly via institutional offices—without needing to use online platforms, even though they would be well equipped to do so. Conversely, the most precarious are directed toward digital tools, which constitute an additional layer of difficulty.

A major contribution of this work lies in its deconstruction of common narratives around welfare dependency and fraud. Deville reveals the sorting mechanisms that structure RSA access, rooted in the very norms of bureaucratic governance: urban mobility requirements, physical and symbolic barriers, the delegation of procedures to applicants, and behavioural expectations shaped by stereotypes of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor.

Accessing the RSA, Deville argues, demands a genuine apprenticeship in the role of welfare recipient—an arduous journey through normative and institutional constraints. The most vulnerable individuals often hesitate to claim what is rightfully theirs, perceiving the RSA as issued by a distant, superior authority and fearing that they do not conform sufficiently to be eligible. The book highlights how public action, rather than mitigating inequalities, may at times deepen them.

This work is essential reading for anyone concerned with the digital divide, rural poverty, inequalities in access to rights, public policies addressing precarity, or the contemporary challenges of social support.

Deville's underlying doctoral research was awarded two national prizes in 2020:

- First Prize, Prix de recherche de la Fondation de Recherche Caritas France.
- Thesis Prize, French Defender of Rights.