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**On the frontline of global inequalities: A decolonial approach to the study of street-level bureaucracies**

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*Abstract:* This article aims to contribute to street-level bureaucracy theory by bringing to the forefront the experiences and perspectives of the Global South. Our argument is that mainstream literature in this field overlooks the social tensions that are more explicit in developing societies, resulting in a structurally limited analytical framework. We identify two key factors from the Global South that are often underestimated: the high degree of social inequalities that fundamentally affect state–citizen relationships, and the ways in which the state itself reflects and reproduces these inequalities. Our critique represents a step towards decolonizing the field and highlighting the conceptual contributions that studies from and of the Global South can offer. By examining the experiences of the Global South, we can gain insights into the crises societies in the Global North are also experiencing. Our article aims to contribute to street-level bureaucracy theory by emphasizing the value of incorporating these perspectives into the study of street-level bureaucracy.

*Keywords:* street-level bureaucracy, state, inequalities, decoloniality

## Introduction

There has been a sharp increase, in recent years, in street-level bureaucracy (SLB) studies focused on (and produced in) the Global South, in different continents and from different disciplinary perspectives (Ambort and Straschnoy 2018; Cerna et al. 2017; Chudnovsky and Peeters 2021; Eiró 2019; Lotta and Marques 2020; Meza and Moreno 2020; Nisar 2018; Peeters and Campos 2022). These studies are, however, usually overlooked in mainstream scholarship produced and published in the Global North and, as a consequence, they do not shape the core theoretical debates on SLB. Furthermore, the theoretical framework produced in the Global North is still often used uncritically to understand cases in the Global South, resulting in highly normative understandings of state bureaucracies (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014; Koivisto 2013; Pepinsky et al. 2017), usually based on assumptions that bureaucracies in the Global South are “pre-modern or not really bureaucracies,” as Nisar and Masood (2022, 334) noted. While studies in the Global South are required to reference work from the Global North—no matter how case specific or dated they are—the opposite does not happen (Nisar and Masood 2022; Haque and Turner 2013). Southern cases are largely treated as variations of Western universalism (Malhotra 2011; Said 1979) and are mainly regarded as being specific to their societies (Bertelli et al. 2020). This contributes to a nonrepresentative “global public administration theory” (Nisar and Masood 2022), especially considering that the vast majority of the world’s street-level bureaucrats live in the Global South (Peeters and Campos 2022).

Decolonizing the field requires, among other things, understanding and undoing the patterns of reproduction of inequalities in the knowledge production system. This begins with questioning assumptions about North and South states and bureaucracies, and challenging the generalization of findings that are the product of their context (in the North), and which keep others studies

(from the South) excluded from theory-building. Decolonizing the field also encompasses—just as urgently—taking seriously the politics of citations, how conferences are organized, and how publications reflect the diversity of the field.

The aim of this article is to contribute to the field of SLB by bringing experiences from the Global South to the center of the debate. Our ambition is to offer a decolonial perspective to this body of studies that too often reproduce ways of thinking and frames of analysis that have been built *in* and *for* the Global North. Our core argument is that SLB studies suffer from a structurally limited analytical framework, one that is blind to the tensions that are more explicit in developing societies. If, as proposed by Lotta et al. (2022), street-level bureaucrats are deeply sensitive to context, and different contexts produce different responses (Møller and Stensøta 2019), the literature should then—indeed, must—be able to include perspectives and theories coming from the Global South.

We develop our critiques along a main line of argument, showing that mainstream SLB literature, as a Western-centric scholarship (Peeters and Campos 2022), usually ignores the Global South societies. Theories originating from the Global South frequently address topics that hold relevance for all countries, yet are often overlooked in mainstream literature (Nisar and Masood 2022), including studies focusing on social inequalities, social and economic crises, the plight of refugees and migrants, the rise of populism, and democratic backsliding (Kieh 2015; Pinheiro-Machado and Vargas-Maia 2023). By taking these theories seriously, the Global North can gain a deeper understanding of the complex and interconnected issues that affect societies around the world, and work towards more inclusive and just solutions.

In this article, we discuss two main contributions that the literature on the state and bureaucracy, from the perspective of Global South, offers to SLB theory formation. First is the idea that the state itself, as a historical and political construction, is seen and performed in ways that reflect and reproduce social inequalities, and second is the notion that the high degree of social inequalities countries in the Global South experience fundamentally changes state–citizen relationships, since values shaping states are often different to those regulating societies.

The arguments we present in this article are urgent for two main reasons. The first is because they present steps towards the decolonization of the field, so that research conducted in the Global South can become less dependent on the literature *from* the North, which relies exclusively on studies *on* the North. Although a dialogue through proper referencing of ideas should always be established, researchers should resist seeing these analytical frameworks as universal, abstract theories. Academic concepts and theories can also be a product of a history of science that has systematically excluded knowledge production from the South (Tuhiwai 2021), and that has gone hand-in-hand with different forms of violence for the control and subjugation of “other” cultures and peoples—most notably, for our argument, social Darwinism, used to explain and justify social inequalities (Claeys 2000). As a result, they are too often taken as the end point in an evolutionary line that should not frame debates on state formation in the South. Discussions about the relationship between the quality of bureaucracy and development (Evans 1995), or indexes such as Quality of Government (Holmberg, Rothstein and Nasiritousi 2009), are examples of this process which, as can be seen from the references (and preferences) coming from the Global North, usually position countries of the Global South as at a disadvantage.

The second reason that our argument is urgent is due to the conceptual contribution studies *from* and *of* the South have to offer to the field. The growing number of case studies in the South

(notably, China, India, Mexico and Brazil; cf. Peeters and Campos 2022) reflects the geographical spread of the SLB field. This new wave of studies presents an important opportunity for the field to appreciate “the ways different patterns of practice contribute to advancing or blocking greater equality in service delivery” (Lipsky 2022, 11). What is still rare, however, is actual engagement with the results of these studies, in ways that could lead to theory development. On this point, it is important to mention some SLB special issues (cf. Hupe, Hill and Buffat 2015; Kolthoff et al. 2016; Stivers and DeHart-Davis 2022) and literature reviews (cf. Buffat 2015; Nothdurfter and Hermans 2018; Tummers et al. 2015) that do not cite a single study from the South—and which are also not dedicated to a specific location, country, or region.

Although SLB research on or from the Global South has become more popular in recent years, this does not mean it was not being conducted in the previous decades: examples include research on Ghana (Crook and Ayee 2006), Brazil (Faria and Castro 1992), India and Korea (Wade 1992), to mention a few. Apart from these case studies, seminal work on Global South state bureaucracies that has not directly engaged with the concept of SLB (i.e., Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014; Ferguson 1994; Gupta 2012) has also been ignored in the development of the field.

This article does not try to identify the specific nature of street-level bureaucracies in the Global South (cf. Peeters and Campos 2022). Rather, our intention is to demonstrate how these cases can contribute to general theory, and offer important insights into the crises societies in the Global North are experiencing.

The emerging wave of research on and from the Global South offers a valuable opportunity to enhance the breadth and relevance of the field. For researchers spearheading this effort to expand the field geographically, their challenge lies in introducing a rich literature developed around a



diverse range of state formation experiences, which may be unfamiliar to SLB scholars in other countries.

In the following section, we situate our discussion within the existing literature on SLB studies and expound on our decolonial approach. We then present our key arguments in two sections: The first delves into the notion of state legitimacy, encompassing discussions on “weak institutions”, dysfunctional states, informality, and trust; the second explores the broader cultural and political dimensions of social inequalities in the Global South, which are inadequately addressed in mainstream SLB literature. The article concludes by emphasizing the imperative to incorporate perspectives from the Global South in SLB studies, underscoring their potential to enrich the theoretical understanding of state–citizen relationships.

### **Decolonizing street-level bureaucracy studies**

This article contributes to the interdisciplinary *street-level bureaucracy* field. Drawing on work in public administration, sociology, political science and, indirectly, on other disciplines, the field has proved its worth in academia and the public debate by demonstrating how public policies change when delivered (Hupe 2019). Its success is partly due to the popularization of the term “street-level bureaucracy”, developed mainly by Michael Lipsky (2010). The theory behind the popular (and sometimes abused) term focuses on the conceptualization of frontline workers—the street-level bureaucrats—as the last link in the policy-making chain, since it is only in these agents’ interactions with clients that public policies “come to life”. Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2022[2003]) contributed to the field by considering how frontline workers classify clients into social or professional categories in order to simplify their work. They

describe, for instance, how social workers concentrate their efforts on clients they view as worthy of investment. Researchers in the Global North have focused on several factors determining this process, such as gender, occupation, trajectory, and their own values (e.g., Evans 2016; Harrits and Moller 2013; Gofen 2014; Raaphorst and Loyens 2020; De Boer 2020; Meyers et al. 2003); organizational features, such as incentives, relation with peers, instruments of management (e.g., Gassner and Gofen 2018; Sandfort 2000; Siciliano 2017); clients' characteristics (Thomann and Rapp 2017; Raaphorst and Groeneveld, 2019; Jilke and Tummers 2018); and even systemic elements, such as the degree of social cohesion and type of welfare state (e.g., Møller and Stensöta 2018; Thomann and Rapp 2017; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003).

In mainstream SLB studies, it is generally accepted that each encounter between frontline worker and client represents an instance of policy delivery (Dubois 1999), which is shaped by agents' conceptions of their work and their clients (Jilke and Tummers 2018; Thomann and Rapp 2017). This process determines “in a concrete way the form and substance of citizens' rights” (Hasenfeld et al. 1987, 398) as frontline workers decide who gets what and how (Oorshot 2008; Lipsky 2010). This approach has attracted many scholars from the Global South to the field, not least because interest in citizenship and state formation is widespread across many disciplines (see, for example, Pepinsky et al. [2017], the systematic review by Peeters and Campos [2022], and the Special Issue by Lotta et al. [2022]).

Since anthropologist Akhil Gupta's (1995, 376) alert about the absence of ethnographies of the state documenting what “lower-level officials actually do in the name of the state”, both anthropology and policy implementation studies have demonstrated the varied effects of the state on the everyday lives of people around the world (Das and Poole 2004; Stack 2012; Koster

2019). Research on the everyday constitution of the state found fertile ground in implementation studies, especially since interacting with frontline workers is often the main—or only—face of the state that marginalized people in the Global South see. The reproduction of social inequalities through these interactions has become central to these studies (Gupta 2012; Pires 2019).

At this point, we must acknowledge the shortfalls of the terminology we adopt in this article. To begin, it is not without resistance that we adopt the binary division of the world between the “North” and “South”. While recognizing the consequences of the act of naming, we put forward a conscious subversion of these categories aimed at an engaged practice “through which global unequal power structures are actively restructured” (Kloß 2017, 14). We recognize that these terms establish hierarchy, forging the image of a homogeneous advanced “Northern” *society* (intentionally in the singular), where science radiates *from*, in contrast to a lesser counterpart, from where the knowledge produced is always “local”, “regional”, or case-specific. Since we aim to problematize this assumption in the case of SLB studies, these categories function here as a reminder of the way they are used: the “Global South” refers, also for us, “to people, places, and ideas that have been left out of the grand narrative of modernity” (Rudwick and Makoni 2021, 259). As will become clear throughout the article, our understanding of the “Global South” is also heterogeneous, and from this diversity comes the richness which, we argue, is essential for the development of our field.

Given this specific goal, we praise approaches that subvert the North/South dichotomy by including, in the latter category, places and people that are geographically located in the North, but systematically excluded from the academic circuits of knowledge production. Likewise, we include in this discussion another problematic category: “Western”. The often-interchangeable use of the terms West and North reveals how some countries, typically Eastern European ones

and some Asian countries, are considered economically developed but too culturally different to produce knowledge relevant to theory building. In other words, these are also places where “general” Western theories must be applied and tested, but only so far as to demonstrate deviations of the “norms”. This “imperialism of categories” (Nandy 1990, 69) is challenged by authors like Gupta (1995), who call on us all to problematize notions as fundamental as “state” and “civil society”.

Another important conceptual note relates to the fact that many studies in the Global South have analyzed the dynamics we define as “street-level bureaucracy” without referring to these terms (see Sharma and Gupta 2006; Thelen et al. 2015; Auyero 2011). These studies are, unfortunately, largely ignored by the specialized literature, which is why we also aim to bring these studies into dialogues within the recognized canon. Rather than providing an exhaustive list of references, we offer readers some concrete examples and the keys to engaging with such works—even when they do not use the terms and references that SLB researchers consider as foundational to their field. This is part of the process of breaking free from vicious dynamics of knowledge production that privilege work done in certain countries, and by certain countries, while ignoring work from others. We take this to be an indispensable aspect of our decolonial approach.

Another crucial challenge this article faces is to avoid Tuck and Yang’s (2012) urge not to let decolonization become nothing more than a metaphor. According to the authors, “the language of decolonization has been superficially adopted into education and other social sciences, supplanting prior ways of talking about social justice, critical methodologies, or approaches which decenter settler perspectives” (Tuck and Yang 2012, 2). That is a risk we consciously incur in a theory-driven article. Our call for the decolonization of SLB studies is a concrete step pertaining to knowledge production. It is a call that begins with a critique of sources used, and of

generalizations based on the geopolitical distribution of power and colonial relations. It is a call that encompasses understandings and practices of state building that are far from merely theoretical. For this reason, the sections that follow are organized around concrete topics, with the ambition of generating concrete actions. First, we discuss topics related to the normative idea of state legitimacy, and then move on to social inequalities and cultural norms. We use these topics to propose a decolonial approach to SLB literature.

### **The legitimacy of the state**

Concepts such as “weak institutions” (O’Donnell 1993), and “defective democracies” (Merkel 2004) are some of the ways that Global South states are conceptualized in comparison to the Global North. Normative classifications permeate the literature on state institutions in postcolonial contexts, using terms such as “quasi-states”, “non-states”, “state failure”, to identify deviations from a Western referential point of states possessing an inherent coherence created through a deliberate alignment between the state and the nation (i.e., Jackson 1992; Clapham 1996).

While acknowledging the potential pitfalls of embracing a relativistic perspective that disregards how citizens themselves perceive these “dysfunctionalities,” it is crucial not to automatically assume a negative connotation for such deviations, as it presupposes a norm that is not ahistorical (Gupta 1995). Consequently, it becomes imperative to investigate the custodian of this standard, and the vested interests associated with it. Abstractions such as the “modern liberal state” or “Weberian bureaucracy” cannot be used as a priori reference points since they, too, have

different meanings in different places; principles such as formality, impersonality, and even fairness in public administration can also carry layers of cultural meanings that are far removed from what researchers understand as being an ideal state (Nisar 2018; Masood and Nisar 2022; Gulivev 2011; Lavee 2021). For instance, the concept of an impersonal state may lead to isolated and distant bureaucracies, resulting in the failure to provide essential services to clients who depend on interpersonal connections to engage with the state (Grindle 2012; Pepinsky et al. 2017). These different practices of universalizing Western ideals should be understood as normative discursive constructions of the state (Gupta 1995). Such a shift in understanding knowledge production has the advantage of foregrounding domestic and international power structures, especially in postcolonial contexts. In the following subsections, we discuss the empirical implications of taking this position.

#### *Weak institutions and dysfunctional states*

In the study of state institutions, an important concept used to make international comparisons is the idea of the state's capabilities and the strength of its institutions. Many of these comparative studies use different types of metrics in order to differentiate (and rank) states by considering the degree of weakness or strength in the countries' institutions (Stein and Tommasi 2007; Berkman et al. 2008; Merkel 2004), thus placing countries of the Global South in the worse positions (see, for example, the indexes Quality of Government or the Worldwide Governance Indicators).

These studies consider that "weak institutions" are problematic, as they lack legitimacy, do not allow for functional citizenship, and fail to protect citizens. They also create an environment of

low trust and disconnections between citizens and the state, which may jeopardize democracy (Uslaner 2012; Rothstein and Theorell 2008; Fukuyama 1995).

Some of these ideas also inspire, in different ways, SLB scholars. The field is founded on the premise that citizens' encounters with frontline workers influence their perception of the state, shaping the state itself (Brodkin 2012). This assumption considers that frontline workers in liberal democracies should develop the ideal of fair and impartial treatment of citizens by the government (Møller and Hill 2018; Rothstein and Theorell 2008) and be accountable for it (Hupe and Hill 2007; Thomann et al. 2023). Another assumption is that, despite the expectation that people should be treated fairly, these workers may use moral judgments, bias, or stereotypes—tendencies that should be identified, avoided, and punished (Harrits 2019; Nagtegall et al. 2020). These studies also consider that trust is a central issue in the state–citizens relations, which is largely built through interactions with frontline workers (Tummers and Bekkers 2014; Rothstein and Theorell 2008; Davidovitz and Cohen 2022). Despite showing that citizens view street-level bureaucrats negatively (Bertram et al., 2022), the field has not yet properly addressed how street-level bureaucracies are not always (or not widely) seen or trusted as “the state”. As proposed by Peake and Forsyth (2022, 12), in some places “there is next to no state above the street”. Therefore, the question that arises is: If frontline workers and their institutions are not acting or seen as “state-like”, do their actions affect the way citizens see the state, or only the way they see these specific institutions or bureaucrats?

This line of questioning challenges the idea that “weak institutions”—and the lack of trust in them—creates deficient citizenship, as in a citizenship that does not fully grasp the idea of belonging to a national body regulated by rights and duties (Uslaner 2012; Peeters et al. 2018).

This is, however, a circular argument, where the lack of trust in state institutions would be, at the

same time, the product and the cause of a faulty state. What we believe is lost when the cycle of “weak institutions – deficient citizenship” is taken for granted is the possibility that citizens can actually differentiate between the “dysfunctional” institutions that they rely on in the state of which they are part. Citizens will adapt their expectations and strategies to deal with institutions on an individual basis (Auyero 2011), just as street-level bureaucrats will adapt their actions to repair the broken state (Masoor and Nisar 2022), often going far beyond policy implementation (Lotta et al. 2021) and even using personal resources (Lavee 2021).

Even if most—or all—state institutions that citizens encounter daily are fundamentally different to what they believe the state should be like, their view of the state itself (and thus their citizenship) does not necessarily need to become a “faulty” or dysfunctional one. Beyond the resilient hope for a better state (which we discuss in the next section)—that in itself testifies how these interactions do not always translate into deficient citizenship—the different strategies used by citizens to deal with these institutions need to be interpreted as responses to how certain services are provided (Eiró 2019).

Another related notion we wish to challenge is the idea that “low-trust bureaucracies” are endemic to the Global South (Moynihan et al. 2014), associated with low social capital indexes or even limited democratic practices (Ramos Larraburu 2019). This reflects how the literature deals with public institutions in the Global South, often employing terms such as “low-trust countries”. Our approach challenges these assumptions by asking: For whom are street-level bureaucracies “low-trust”? Instead of evoking a misleading geopolitical divide, this question takes us to the core of the analysis of bureaucrat–citizen interaction. On the one hand, higher socioeconomic classes in the Global South may have no problem trusting that the police will defend their interests, even to the detriment of other citizens’ rights and physical integrity. On



the other hand, a migrant-background, low-wage worker in Europe may not see welfare agencies as “high-trust institutions”, as this dichotomy suggests.

Some may argue that Global North states are not free from mistakes, but that these are exceptional, and actors are held accountable for them. A recent scandal concerning the Dutch Tax and Customs office is illustrative of the opposite (Newman and Mintrom 2023). Between 2004 and 2019, the office falsely accused an estimated 26,000 parents and 70,000 children of fraudulently receiving childcare allowances. Having to repay the allowances, many fell into debt, and migrant-background families were disproportionately targeted, since “second nationality” was one of the factors chosen for conducting the extra checks. Right after the scandal broke, the ruling party affirmed itself as the most voted for in national elections. Although an investigative commission was set up by the national parliament to look into the issue, this form of institutional accountability does little to build or repair the trust of historically marginalized groups within societies in the North. These are the stories of trust that a national score in an index never tell.

Our argument does not aim to disparage studies such as Peeters et al. (2018, 7), which shows in detail the “bureaucratic experience of citizens and their complicated access to services and benefits” in Mexico. The authors develop an important discussion on how low- trust bureaucracies can be explained by the structural characteristics of Mexico’s administrative context, amplifying social inequalities. What we challenge are generalizations premised on a dichotomy between low- and high- trust societies, ones that conceptualize “trust” as a universal value (based on dominant Western experiences with public institutions) which is the determinant of economic and social development (i.e., Fukuyama 1995; Putnam 1993). In our view, this position contributes to the stigmatization of Global South societies, marking their position as having inferior types of bureaucracy. Moreover, and of utmost importance to the objective of this

article, this stance undermines research potential regarding the generalizability of Global South case studies to other parts of the world, particularly those concerning interactions between citizens and state bureaucracies characterized by a lack of trust—which, we stress, are not exclusive to these countries.

### *Discretion or informality?*

Another characteristic usually associated with the idea of weak institutions is informality. Informality is seen as constitutive of the public arena of the Global South, and informal practices have been systematically ignored by researchers in the Global North (Jaffe and Koster 2019). Even if the concept of “informality” emerged to theoretically reintegrate the work and housing solutions of people in the Global South into political and economic systems, it remains defined in the negative, “as lacking the order, state regulation, or employment relations associated with normative conceptions of capitalist wage labor” (Millar 2018, 8). While SLB scholarship deals with a related practice—the use of discretion—it does not engage with the theories of informality, thus reinforcing the myth of the absence of informality. In performing their tasks, bureaucrats are challenged by scarce resources and shifting attributions, situations often dealt with via creative solutions (Lipsky 2010). Indeed, improvisation is key in frontline workers’ routines, which complements and shapes the ways they use the discretionary power of their work (Thomann et al. 2018; Hupe 2013). However, under some circumstances, the state is “under construction” (Peake and Forsyth 2022): policies are broken and street-level bureaucrats have to go beyond policy implementation to repair basic functions of the state (Masood and Nisar 2022). Mainstream literature would probably consider these practices as uncontrolled, or as generating

accountability gaps. Indeed, as some authors have shown, this approach disregards how “divergence” may occur when street-level bureaucrats are attached to their personal commitments of solving citizens’ problems (Gofen 2014), and what is categorized as bending or breaking the rules is, often, a creative and improved policy outcome. This is because the boundaries between what is right or wrong, predictable and unpredictable, predatory behavior or improvisational, may be blurred (Peeters and Campos 2022). Moreover, what, then, is considered a “normal” use of discretion, and when does it become “informal practice”?

This question points to a rather arbitrary separation of practices that seems to follow a political view of state bureaucracies. Our argument is not that different countries do not have different levels of (in)formality, but, rather, that similar practices gain different labels, and therefore different statuses, depending on their (geopolitical) location. The critical appraisal of the literature and its use of concepts of “informal practices” and “discretion” is revealing of how researchers frame these debates, reproducing ideas of (il)legitimate practices. If the SLB literature has, on the one hand, contributed to the understanding of how bureaucracies in the North actually function, and how the implementation of policies also depends on the “human factor”, on the other hand, it has not challenged notions of “advanced” or “modern” bureaucracies against their antonyms.

While there may be consensus on what good and bad use of discretion is, we see a difference in the way the literature deals with discretion *as practiced* and discretion *as granted* (Hupe 2013).

The need for discretionary power is widely accepted as healthy for the functioning of many public services (Thomann et al. 2018; Zacka 2017). When it comes to the South, however, the presumption of a dysfunctional state leaves no room for a “normal” discretionary space, since it would not be predicted by formal rules that make for its functional use (Hupe 2013), where

frontline workers are subjected to accountability and responsiveness processes (Thomann van Engen and Tummers 2018). Put differently, in this framework, similar practices become “use of discretion” when embedded in highly formalized structures, while the lack thereof makes them “informal” or even “corrupt”. The literature on informality from the South rarely becomes a reference for SLB studies because these practices are considered the result of a *lack of bureaucracy*, while “discretion” is non-formalized practices that are bureaucratically expected. This framework does not take account of the emic meanings of terms such as “discretion” or “informality”—or many others that refer to similar and localized practices that are shaped by the combination of institutional and cultural factors. Following this path will lead to an understanding of *legitimate* and *illegitimate* bureaucratic practices, and the tensions that emerge from this meaning attributing process, in which scholars play a fundamental role. The work of Jean-Pierre Olivier de Sardan (2014) is among the studies that have focused on how norms usually seen as illegitimate become incorporated—and thus legitimated and accepted—by bureaucracies in Africa. Instead of seeing them as limitations, they are part of a social and institutional context where bureaucracies are places of negotiation and contestation of power, therefore reflecting local realities and “practical norms” (see Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan 2014).

What seems to us a more productive comparison is the coherence between what state bureaucracies aim to do (and are built to do) and what bureaucrats believe they should be doing. Instead of comparing (ideals of) bureaucratic types as natural to certain countries, this approach looks at how bureaucracies expect and rely on discretion, the values on which this is based, and when and how exceptions to these rules are deemed legitimate. Eiró (2022), for instance, has suggested looking at the way frontline workers interpret and translate changes in the political

landscape into their actions, which puts the focus on fast-changing norms and values that policies and bureaucracies have not (yet) incorporated. Such a line of enquiry will certainly reveal stark differences between North and South, but, more interestingly and relevantly, it will reveal intra-regional differences, highlight bureaucratic nuances, and position the research focus on the frontline workers. This approach can also generate better comparisons based on the levels of coherence between formal and informal aspects of SLB, and not simply on an assumed level of development of state bureaucracies.

### *The faces of the state and trust in the state*

From the perspective of most citizens, the state has different faces, each embodied by different state agencies and their bureaucrats (Dubois 2020). For citizens from low-income groups, the state is often personified in a few frontline workers with whom they interact regularly, and this personification comes with its own inequalities (Pires 2019). The personified state is experienced as favoring some and disfavoring others, and most of all, producing and reproducing social inequalities in the provision of public services (Eiró and Koster 2019) and creating different statuses of citizenship (Nisar 2018). It distributes resources according to personal relations logic that more often than not is contrary to the goals of public policies (Grindle 2012; Lavee 2021).

This approach emerges from the understanding that states are culturally constituted, and substantiated in people's lives, and that these constructions have sociopolitical and everyday consequences (Sharma and Gupta 2006, 27). By calling attention to the highly unequal and personal positions the state can take, we would like to problematize the methodological assumption that looking at the street level is a way to understand broader elements of the state

and the relationship between the state and civil society (Brodkin 2012; Lipsky 2010). By saying this, we are not arguing that highly institutionalized interactions at the frontline of public policies cannot shape imaginations of the state or affect citizenship. Instead, we are suggesting that not taking such constructions for granted calls for the investigation of how even the least state-like interactions—from the modern liberal state perspective—can also create and shape different forms of citizenship, and call subjects to imagine different ways the state is constituted.

While the use of discretion among frontline workers has been systematically studied, its effect on people's trust in the state is less integrated into SLB scholarship (Peeters et al. 2020; Davidovitz and Cohen 2023). Anthropology has delved further into this issue, showing how people's trust in the state can be shattered by unfair practices (Koster 2019), but, the same time, how this does not always translate into a rejection of the state by people, but rather into the wish for a stronger state (Nuijten 2003).

When it comes to the state, we perceive the prevalence of romanticized representations of people in the South seeing the (faulty) state as the enemy, something to be fought *against* (Jansen 2012). This approach has been inspired by seminal work emphasizing the state's incapacity to govern self-organizing communities, such as that of James Scott (1998; see also Graeber 2007). In agreement with Jansen (2012), we see that actual hope *for* the state has been largely under-analyzed by Western researchers studying non-Western countries. Although this might represent a yearning for a more “Western-like” state, however, it usually simply means *more* state (i.e., services, rights, contact with institutions), and its personification or organization around principles that are not those of liberal states is not necessarily seen as a problem to be fixed.

We consider that different levels of trust in institutions is important for the development of a decolonial approach to SLB scholarship, one using a different perspective than that of developed societies. Such a perspective should, of course, consider that institutions do not enjoy widespread trust among their clients, and this trust has to be built through processes that can take specific cultural and historical shapes.

However, this perspective should also problematize the space that “trust in institutions” has gained in citizenship studies (i.e., Rothstein and Stolle 2008). Lack of trust in institutions is often framed as an individual or cultural citizenship flaw, and therefore that “more trusting” citizens would inspire a better state. This perspective is useless in a decolonial approach to SLB because it ignores the processes that formed these institutions, and their relations with citizens. It creates an unhistorical point of reference that stigmatizes informal strategies by clients and bureaucrats to deal with a state often built to serve the interests of a (national or colonizer) elite.

Furthermore, such a perspective is also relevant to understanding the decreasing levels of trust in institutions in developed societies themselves.

### **Unequal societies**

The high level of inequalities in many societies in the Global South presents difficulties for the organic construction of a stable social contract around basic shared principles (Paugam 2005).

When certain groups have disproportionate influence over state building, the potential for dissonance between principles guiding the state and society in general cannot be ignored (Eriksen 1991). Deeply rooted social inequalities determine not only the distribution of resources, but also challenge the very notions that justify the inequalities of access to these

resources (Acemoglu and Robinson 2019). The state, it must be remembered, is not an autonomous entity but is populated by individuals that are part of society; in the words of Fox (1985), the state is “not a ‘thing’ but a ‘happening’” (1985, 156), its functioning is permeated by a permanent conflict of ideals. As Forsythe and Peake (2022, p. 16) argue, in some places the state is “permanently under construction”.

What we consider to be a limited understanding of Global South societies is precisely that the state is not always the space of regulation for social conflicts and a source of protection; expectations and performances, both by bureaucrats and citizens, might also follow this reasoning. Most often, mainstream scholarship (and we do not refer exclusively to the SLB field) frames these debates in terms of organizing concepts that point to the inherent dysfunctionality of these states (Pepinsky et al. 2017). An example is the idea that countries of the Global South have “endemic patronage” (Peters and Bianchi 2023; Grindle 2012; Cheung 2005). Other terms, like clientelism, (neo)patrimonialism, personalism, and informality, are used in an over-culturalist way that exaggerates the role of “cultures”, to predict the destiny of failure of these states (Grindle 2012; Peeters et al. 2018; Gulivev 2011), without understanding how these different systems of regulation can actually function as another structure of social cohesion (Peake and Forsyth 2021)—and may even have positive effects (Toral 2022), as we discuss next.

### *Norms and different systems of regulation*

If we accept that state formation in many Global South societies was not an organic product of social tensions but, rather, is the product of imported and imposed institutions (as New Public Management, for instance), a question arises: What social contracts existed before the formation



of such states? We argue that states in the Global South were built on top of existing regulation systems that were not always in accordance with the norms guiding these states. Previous forms of legitimization, social cohesion, and social structuring did not disappear but, rather, co-existed in more or less conflicting ways with the new institutions (Evans 2016; Peake and Forsyth 2021). As examples, we can name attempts to institutionalize previous networks of social protection (Cookson 2018; welfare programs designed around “family values”) and collective action (Koster 2016; neighborhood leaders recognized as redistributive agents by the state), or the adaptation of electoral politics to family- and community-based distribution of power (Ansell 2014).

This discussion is related to our previous discussion on state “dysfunctionality”, which presumes that the interaction between citizens and state institutions cannot be *functionally* regulated by other values. Besides problematizing this norm—which we did in the previous section—it seems relevant to us to call out the automatic disqualification of any other regulatory system as unfair, unjust, dysfunctional, or even *deregulated*. The question is: For whom is it unfair, unjust, and dysfunctional?

Suppose the distribution of public resources in a state institution follows a different order than expected (by the researcher, or by other institutions at higher levels). In that case, this says very little about how citizens value their state, state institutions, or their citizenship. It is possible—and here we are interested in opening up the discussion to multiple possibilities—that other norms are more effective and legitimized by citizens for distributing resources according to values that are more important to the individuals involved in these encounters. Personal trust can be considered superior to impersonality in determining who should receive resources; the uses of street-level bureaucrats’ personal resources can be a way to express commitment (Lavee 2021);

communities or families can be considered better at distributing resources than individual allocation; personal relationships with state officials can be a better source of accountability than bureaucratic mechanisms of transparency (de L'Estoile 2014); going beyond the formalities can be a way to get things done on a context where there is a lack of state capacity (Massod and Nisar 2021), and a bureaucracy embedded in the communities where it serves may make better policies (Bhavani and Lee 2016; Pepinsky et al. 2017; Lotta and Marques 2019). Moreover, bureaucrats guided by informal rules can engage in flexible problem-solving, thus improving the quality of services (Mangla 2022). Clientelism, for example, can function as a regulation system for the distribution of resources based on personal relationships and direct channels of accountability (Ansell 2014), and patronage can make bureaucrats more accountable and effective (Torel 2022).

Once again, these considerations do not ignore struggles for the betterment of public services that are constantly present in developing countries. It is not about romanticizing practices that citizens themselves would like to see changed. Quite the opposite, our considerations intend to open the eyes of the researcher to different paths that this improvement of service can take. Citizens and frontline workers alike can be unhappy with the conditions framing their interactions, but this should not be read as an automatic aspiration to a particular type of state or state service, and even less to an informal, distant, and faceless state (Grindle 2012). The distance separating specific contexts from the Weberian ideal of the state does not define the functionality of dysfunctionality (Chatterjee 2004). In fact, these ideas may become a device to claim that the state will never be good enough, nurturing privatist and neoliberal discourses that defend the reduction of the state (Dubois 1999).

To conclude our line of thought, and to highlight the inherent colonialism of the “dysfunctional state” thesis, looking at the “developed” states themselves can be of use. A decolonial approach to the study of the state and its institutions must take into account the internal colonial dimensions that permeated (political and academic) state-building projects in different countries in the South (Gledhill 2021). For example, a decolonial approach has to consider that the “citizen-state relation is deeply influenced by the colonial origins of their bureaucratic apparatus” (Nisar and Masood 2022, 335) in which, for example, street-level bureaucrats can be seen as coercive agents of the state (p. 335), responsible for the dirty work of creating a social order and maintaining the status quo (Nisar and Masood 2019). Therefore, they can use their power and discretion to enforce “social norms through violence, corruption, extortion and arbitrary arrests” (Nisar and Masood 2019, 891). These examples show how we have to highlight the idea of dysfunctionality understanding what is behind it. When are “dysfunctional” services or institutions no longer exceptions, but a sign of a faulty, authoritarian, and violent state? This question leads us to rethink how we consider the many “exceptions” to the modern liberal states, and especially how citizens deal with them. The notion of “Western modernity” itself needs to be problematized in this approach, since its historical construction as the ideal of progress is founded on the world’s ideological and economic colonial division (Dussel et al. 2000; Mignolo 2000).

Furthermore, countries’ scores in an index provide only a partial narrative when it comes to citizens’ trust in public institutions, and it is worth looking at the experiences of marginalized populations in states equipped with “strong and trustworthy institutions”. Also in the North, notions such as formality, impersonality, and fairness are experienced differently by different citizens (Jaffe and Koster 2019), especially by those who are not seen as “belonging” to the

national body, and need to prove their citizenship to the police or welfare workers (Çankaya and Mepschen 2019; De Genova 2016; Haaparjarvi 2018; Koning and Vollebergh 2019; Zauberman and Lévy 2003). This body of studies reveals how the stark separation of SLB scholarship between North and South—as if these were worlds apart—reflects scholars’ views and interests, as we have previously argued; it is a fabricated distinction that reinforces the idea that North and South states are at different stages of a development continuum, and therefore that nothing from the South will be of interest to those in the North.

*The degree of inequalities in policy implementation*

We argue that most of the mainstream SLB theory does place social inequalities at the center of the analysis, which is a constitutive aspect of the social tissue in developing societies (Lotta and Pires 2019). Despite some recent efforts, the lack of centrality in the discussion about inequalities jeopardizes the understanding of a core element of SLB theory: how notions of deservingness and citizenship are constituted. Taking into account class inequalities between clients and bureaucrats emerges from the premise that street-level analysis demands a relational approach (Raaphorst and Loyens 2020; Siciliano 2015; Lotta and Marques 2020), as the activity of frontline workers is based on daily interactions with citizens. This critical approach also raises a question seldom asked in studies focused on the Global North: How do street-level bureaucrats act when facing conflicting mandates opposing institutional regulations and values they interpret as socially accepted?

In extant SLB literature, inequality has appeared in three different ways (Lotta and Pires 2019). In original research, as represented by Lipsky’s work (2010), inequality was one of the possible

consequences of the rational act of SLB when using discretion to make decisions. In a second stream of the literature, inequalities are part of the dominant social norms and values that are reproduced during policy implementation. This is mainly represented by the work of Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003). In a third stream, influenced by the work of Goffman and mainly developed in France by authors such as Dubois (1999), Siblot (2005), Spire (2008) and Warin (2002), interactions have symbolic consequences and produce effects in citizens' identities and stigmas. Thus, implementation may affect or produce social positions which are socially unequal. In all three approaches, one of the main elements that may influence inequalities is the idea that SLB differentiate between citizens when deciding who deserves what (Jilke and Tummers 2018).

Despite the fact that these works consider the importance of social inequalities in street-level bureaucracy dynamics, they focus on the potential problems for policy implementation that these inequalities present—such as unequal outcomes for clients and the undermining of the state (Rothstein and Theorell 2008), or how discretion can be a form of correction of social inequalities, effective to avoid unfair “equal” treatment, as proposed by the idea of representative bureaucracy (e.g., Riccucci and Van Ryn 2017; Meier 2019). However, adopting a Global South perspective reveals an alternative viewpoint. First, we must consider that the construction of these societies is based on different types of inequalities and processes of differentiation (Vidal 1999). Past or enduring colonial relations, the coexistence of different ethnic or religious groups, or other specific historical formations of social classes, shape the continuous construction of the state, and the creation of laws and policies. This means that, in some cases, creating or reproducing inequalities at the street level is not a mistake; nor it is a decision that street-level bureaucrats make. These practices can also be part of the institutional structure that legitimizes

the social divisions and inequalities (Paugam 2005). One example, usually ignored by mainstream literature, is the inequalities between street-level bureaucrats who work in the same team but have different social, economic, or professional statuses (Lotta et al, 2023). How can street-level bureaucrats face these unequal structures if they are embedded in them themselves? A Global South perspective would take these different forms of inequalities as a critical part of the explanation for understanding discretion, practices, interactions, deservingness, and so forth. This perspective could reflect what Peake and Forsyth (2022) identify as the relational state, showing how, in the case of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, the state is built through SLBs' "deep networks of relationality". The authors build on a long anthropological tradition of understanding the state as something inseparable from the individuals populating it or, as Bierschenk (2014) puts it, looking at the "state at work".

Using this relational approach, another dimension must complement research on policy implementation: how SLBs relate to norms and values that are different from those inspiring the policies they should be implementing. Research in Brazil has shown how notions of deservingness are incorporated by SLBs implementing welfare policies (Eiró 2019). Even highly institutionalized anti-poverty programs, such as conditional cash transfers, are subjected to the interference of societal values in deciding who the poor are who deserve to be "helped" by the state—even when the programs themselves are trying to avoid such categorizations. Another example is Jewish Israeli social workers who change the scope of policies aimed at facilitating the integration of new Jewish residents to promote integration between the Jewish and Arab populations (Strier et al. 2021). In these cases, even when state programs are designed to reduce bureaucrats' discretion and avoid processes of categorization in the distribution of public services, these actions prevail, and are not seen as an undermining of the program's goals but,

rather, a fix to a design that does not take into account local needs and cultural values. This is a qualitative difference from studies in the Global North that show deservingness judgments as based on fixes to attain policy goals (Katz 2013; Krumer-Nevo and Benjamin 2010), and not as fundamental differences between local and national values.

This brings us to our second point. In Southern countries where liberal democracy is often imposed or imported, political priorities may not reflect cultural norms and values (Lotta et al. 2022). As is the case in several Latin American countries, constitutions that were written after the end of military dictatorships set goals and policy guidelines to fight historical inequalities and social divisions. In situations like this, policy has the explicit aim of cultural change, instead of achieving transformation built on wide acceptance. In consequence, this increases the chance of SLBs facing difficulties when implementing policies that are opposed to values shared by the citizens they interact with—or even their own values—as is the case of SLBs implementing equal access policies in a society with a long tradition of ethnic or religion exclusion, such as the case described by Walker and Gilson (2004) of nurses implementing free medical care in South Africa. Non-compliance to rules, in these cases, is not explained by a lack of accountability or because the rules are too ambiguous (Matland 1995). In fact, resisting implementing policies in accordance with guidelines, or diverging from them, is in this case motivated by compliance with other informal values or institutions (Lotta, Lima and Favareto 2022; Peake and Forsyth 2022).

If bureaucrats are conceptualized as extensions of the state, we might undervalue their role as part of society—a society that will not always share the moral values transmitted by or premised in certain policies. The misguided premise behind this problem is that policies are always mainstream, an expression of a majority will. Opposing this view, the SLB field has already shown that politicians or policy-makers might not share the same ideals as bureaucrats and

citizens (Andreetta 2022; Talbot 2019). What we can learn from cases in the Global South is that this difference in ideals and practices becomes stronger as the social distance between these groups grows (i.e., Perelmiter 2022; Saglam 2022). Stark social inequalities foster a disconnection between ideals of citizenship and expectations of the state, between these two groups, that go beyond political colors (Auyero and Sobering, 2019; Goldstein 2016). Furthermore, pronounced social inequalities also reduce the access of marginalized groups to political representation and, consequently, to a more plural design of public policies (Ferguson 1994; Pires 2019).

This process is reinforced by neoliberalism, which was imposed on many developing countries through structural adjustment programs, exacerbating social inequalities and eroding public services (Harvey 2005). By promoting the myth of a self-regulating market and individual responsabilization, neoliberalism also served as a barrier to the development of a comprehensive infrastructure of social protection in the Global South (Saad-Filho 2015). The result is often a disconnection between public services as they have been designed, and the tools available to deliver them. This leads to an overburdening of street-level workers, who will have to close a large gap (already existing in any state bureaucracy) between policy goals and the means available to deliver them (Eiró 2022; Muñoz-Arce and Rain 2022).

## **Conclusion**

Our aim, with this article, is to respond to Mignolo's (2007) call to delink from the "colonial matrix of power" through an in-depth analysis of street-level bureaucracy studies. Our critique is oriented towards the geopolitical concentration of knowledge production within the SLB field, which calls first for the strengthening of South–South dialogues. The decolonization of the field



should also prioritize the call for academics in (and of) the North to consider not only the specificities of cases in the South, but also to take into account the strategic objectives and perspectives that scholarly communities in these countries offer (Gledhill 2021). Cases and theories *from* the North are surely sources of inspiration and references for comparison but, in the words of Chakrabarty (2000), they should be treated provincially, not universally.

Our critique of mainstream SLB literature is not meant to be an exhaustive examination of how scholarship from and of the Global South can contribute to SLB theory building. Rather, it serves to open the door for future research to explore other sources and areas where Southern scholarship can enrich the theorization of state–citizen relationships. While a more systematic review or meta-analysis of SLB literature in the Global South is urgently needed, this article focuses on the importance of understanding the need for such an enterprise. Although we provide examples to illustrate our point, we do not offer a detailed discussion of how this critique can be operationalized. This presents a fruitful avenue for future research that can draw on Southern perspectives and encourage comparisons between cases from the Global North and South, while considering local peculiarities in a non-hierarchical and non-normative manner.

Throughout the article we opened the door for several thematic areas that require further exploration. One such area is how citizens' trust in the state is shaped by bureaucrats' own perceptions of their roles and their trust in the institutions they serve. Competition between state ideologies often occurs in daily bureaucratic encounters, especially in post-colonial societies, and is further fueled by the rise of political polarization globally. Similarly, although we chose to focus on democracies in the Global South, the study of bureaucracies in authoritarian regimes may offer valuable insights into understanding trust and accountability, which we did not fully address in this article.

In pursuit of these objectives, our recommendations for future research have a dual nature. First, empirical research—whether conducted in the North or the South—should prioritize the values and notions permeating the delivery of public services as perceived by the research participants. This approach entails avoiding preconceived notions that categorize entire countries or regions based on assumed types of state institutions, as these assumptions can deviate significantly from reality and may not be uniform for all those interacting with these institutions. Embracing such an approach will prompt us to reevaluate and challenge the assumptions we uphold and reproduce within our field.

Second, at a meta-level, but equally critical, diversifying the SLB field is an essential part of a decolonial strategy, contributing to its broadening and increased global relevance. This effort encompasses feasible steps, such as rethinking the organization of conferences—for instance, abolishing the divide of panels along the North/South line—and the selection of works cited when constructing theories and generalizing findings. For researchers leading the drive to expand the field geographically, a decolonial approach begins with a critical assessment of the references used, urgently integrating the literature developed around country-specific state and bureaucracy studies into dialogue with the SLB field. These endeavors must be acknowledged and supported by those in positions of power within the academic arena, even if those individuals may not yet be representative of the diverse perspectives we aim to embrace.

Beyond avoiding Western-centric or “Orientalizing” thinking (Said 1979, Velho 2003) in SLB research in the South, such an approach also presents great benefits for research in the North, by foregrounding the global dynamics that have historically shaped states in the North as much as they have shaped those in the South. Finally, to paraphrase Gledhill (2021), the aim of decolonizing the SLB field is not to promote “ressentiment or nativism” (Restrepo and Escobar

2005, 485), but to build a more inclusive international collaboration of knowledge production in our field. Concretely, what we proposed in this article is a research approach to bureaucracies that takes into account their sociopolitical context not only as a form of understanding their functioning, but also as a way of challenging normative hierarchies that are the product of geopolitical inequalities.

#### **Data Availability Statement**

No new data were generated or analysed in support of this research.

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