

The “steering state” model: The emergence of a new organizational form in the French Public Administration[☆]

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, a new organizational form of the administrative system in France has been steadily redefining relations between central administrations and local units of the state. Labelled “the steering state” or the “managerial state”, this new paradigm hinges on separating the strategic functions of steering and controlling the state from the operational functions of execution and policy implementation. The making of this new form of state organization involves two parallel processes: political and cognitive. For one thing, the adoption of concrete measures for “government at distance” results from power struggles between three major ministries (the ministries of the Interior, Budget and Civil Service). For another, a new legitimate “categorization of the state” is being formed in the major committees involved in the reform process of the 1990s; it is carried forward by top civil servants and inspired by the ideas of New Public Management.

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There have been numerous analyses by scholars in the field of public administration of the neomanagerial reforms of bureaucracies launched in many Western countries since the 1980s (for good overviews, Pollitt and Boukaert, 2004; Christensen and Lægreid, 2002). Broadly speaking, these policies bring together various executive or legislative initiatives directed at the administrative system and aim to change the main rules constituting the Western bureaucracies set up between the 19th and the mid-20th centuries: political–administrative relationships; organizational structuring of hierarchy; recruitment, career and working conditions for public sector

[☆] Translated from French by Karen George.

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employees; mode of allocation, accountability and control of public expenditure; relationships between public administrations and their users. These public policies are specific for at least two reasons: they correspond to “constituting” policy issues (i.e., the setting-up or reorganizations of institutions); they claim a general applicability of their principles and instruments to all the different organizations, levels of government, bureaus and officials making up a national administrative system. Of course, their influence should not be overestimated: public bureaucracies change through many other channels than as a result of administrative reforms. Internal and autonomous reforms within ministries, generated by new policies and environments, changes in state activities and their impacts on administrations (Duran and Thoenig, 1996) or new practices of street-level bureaucrats (Weller, 1999) are important driving forces for administrative change. However, over twenty years, administrative reform policies have brought about significant reorganizations of state structures and the emergence of new institutions: consider, for instance, the major changes that occurred in the British administrative system with the creation of executive agencies, each specializing in a particular public policy, in place of ministerial departments (James, 2003); the reform of public sector employment in Italy, where the privatization of the working relationship means that the rules regarding the careers of public employees are defined by employment contracts (Capano, 2003); or the strong expectations raised by the reform of the French budget procedure, the Institutional Act on Budget Legislation (*Loi organique relative aux lois de finances* [LOLF]; passed into law in France on 1st August 2001; implemented from 2006), which entailed the use of many performance management tools that are also dominant in other countries.

In this article, we will defend the idea that studying the way the French state’s organizational form was constructed and negotiated in the 1990s can be a productive approach to capturing changes in the French administrative system. In particular, our objective is to understand how the chains of hierarchical authority that govern relations between different politicoadministrative levels (ministers, central administrations, local units of the state, etc.) on strategic issues such as distribution of areas of competence, resources, responsibilities and modes of control have been challenged and transformed. These changes can partly be seen as an intellectually driven revolution caused by the growing influence of the multipurpose doctrine of New Public Management (Hood, 1991). As successive strata of administrative reforms were laid down in Western countries from the 1980s, the NPM doctrine has played a major role, by criticizing inherited administrative structures and rules and offering new ways of organizing administrative systems. It borrows in heterogeneous fashion from economics, management theory and private-sector management practices (Pollitt, 1990; Merrien, 1999) but also picks up solutions from early reform experiments launched in “Anglo-Saxon” countries and from recommendations by transnational organizations such as the OECD or the World Bank (Sahlin-Andersson, 2002). “New Public Management” stands particularly for four new organizational principles, which are frequently found in differing combinations in Western states but together may be labelled “the steering state”¹:

- separating and differentiating the strategic functions of decision-making, design and steering – as well as monitoring or evaluating public policies – from the functions, usually referred to as “administrative”, that involve responsibility for implementation, “simple” execution or actually meeting the cost of public policies;

¹ This label (in French *État-Stratège*) was used for the first time in 1993 (CGP, 1993).

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