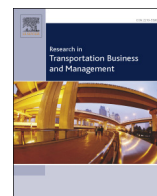




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From national reforms to local compromises: The evolution of France's model for port management, 2004–2015

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ABSTRACT

The French model of port governance has experienced change recently, characterised by two successive reforms that have modified the status of ports. The Law of 13 August 2004 relating to the responsibilities of local authorities (including the devolution of 17 ports of “national interest”), and the reform of seven autonomous ports (given the status of Large Maritime Ports) in 2008 have restructured the evolution of the public organisation of French ports. They have also modified the relationship between port authorities and private operators. The aim of this chapter is to analyse these two reforms and their consequences for port governance. In terms of the devolution of regional ports and the generalisation of the landlord model for major ports, the French model appears to be quite similar to the general trend to devolution of ports throughout the world. Nevertheless, the place of the State (i.e. France's central government) remains important, in the supervision of devolved ports as well as of Large Maritime Ports. Yet, this overall change is transposed variously according to the local context of each port. The transposition of national reforms has led to specific arrangements, so that the port governance model is more complex.

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1. Introduction. The evolution of port governance in France

The evolution in the governance of ports throughout the world since the 1980s has led to a profound change in the interaction between public and private actors. To be sure, these changes have not been homogeneous, and have not led to the emergence of a single model for organising ports. Nevertheless, the shift to a market-based model has guided change in public policy, within a context of liberalising service activities, and now exists on all harbour fronts. Moreover, the investment needs accompanying the processes of massification and concentration have favoured the emergence of new forms of public-private partnerships everywhere, and a general move to port concessions. Numerous studies have examined these trends in detail. Many researchers have also discussed and enriched the model put forward by the World Bank in its “Port Reform Toolkit”, clarifying: the roles of actors (Brooks & Pallis, 2008, 2010; Cullinane & Song, 2002); the consequences for the evolution of the roles of public actors and especially port authorities (Comtois & Slack, 2003; Verhoeven, 2010); as well as the impact of this evolution on port performance (Brooks & Pallis, 2008). The analysis of different port reforms has allowed the rising role of private operators to be clarified. It has also explained the diversity of public organisations

(De Langen & Van der Lugt, 2007; Brooks & Cullinane, 2006; Brooks & Pallis, 2008; Wang, Ng, & Olivier, 2004; Ng & Pallis, 2010 etc.). Such research has mainly concentrated on large ports, though some work has also taken place concerning the devolution and decentralisation processes which have modified the governance of regional and national ports too (Debie & Lavaud-Letilleul, 2010). (See Tables 1 and 2.)

The French case provides a good example of this shift in port governance (Cariou et al., 2014). (Lacoste & Gallais-Bouchet, 2012) Reforms have occurred later than in other European countries, but they have successively led to the devolution (in 2004) of 17 ports of “national interest” and a change in status of France's seven main ports (in 2008). The aim of this paper is to analyse these two recent reforms, as well as their consequences for French ports, in order to contribute to “the multi-examination of port governance and port reform” (*Special volume of Research In Transportation Business & Management*). The main objective is to clarify the context of these reforms, the processes modifying the port model and their consequences on the evolution of port management.

Section 1 sets out the changes in the industrial context facing ports, reviewing the impact of the breakdown of the Fordist economy during the 1970s. The next section explains how a new port model emerged from these two reforms, leading to the devolution of ports of national interest and the change in status of autonomous ports, which together led to France's new port model. Section 3 then looks at how these two

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Table 1

The evolution of the annual average state budget for ports, 1960–1975.

In millions of constant French francs (basis: 1975)	1960–1964	1965–1969	1970–1975
Operating	92	156	170
Investment	234	298	431

Source: French Finance Laws.

reforms affected negotiations between actors, leading to a new organisation and strategy for ports. Lastly, we examine the results of reforms, presenting the positive aspects of these changes, but also pointing to criticisms that can be identified in the wake of reforms (Section 4). This section therefore reviews the outcomes of the reform process by contrasting the modification of port governance with industrial policies related to ports.

2. Contextual issues: the political and economic crisis of the port model at the end of the post-war boom

The recent changes (2004–2016) in the governance of French ports needs to be put into a longer term perspective, in other words the crisis of the industrial-port system that was created in France during the long post-war boom. To review this long term development path, we start by recalling the main characteristics of port policy that were implemented between the 1950s and the mid-1970s, prior to examining the economic and political factors which subsequently brought them into question.

The long post-war boom (known as the “Glorious Thirty” – *Trente Glorieuses* – in French due to the profound economic and social transformation of society (Fourastié, 1979) was marked by strong interventionism by the State (France’s central government). In the economy, this was carried out by a system of medium-term plans implemented and piloted by the French Planning Agency (*Commissariat général au plan*) created in 1946. At the same time, regional development planning emerged in 1963, when the DATAR was created (the Delegation for territorial planning and regional action, or *Délégation à l’aménagement du territoire et à l’action régionale*). France’s ports found themselves at the crossroads of these centralised planning policies. The post-war period was thus characterised by an active modernisation policy of port infrastructures and services, based on the maritime industrial development model (MIDA) which emerged in the Rhineland. This involved integrating port and industrial activities in the same coastal areas. The fundamental principle was to create “industry with its feet in the water” or “ships in factories”: industrial sites (in iron & steel or petrochemicals) were built on the quayside, while port facilities were adapted to the continued growth in the size of ships. This model involved much land use, so that port functions moved outside towns, and downstream towards estuaries (Bird, 1963).

France’s port policy was thus based on vast programmes to create industrial-port zones launched and supervised by the State. Three sites – the “majors” – were concerned, namely Dunkirk, Fos-sur-Mer and Le Havre (Vigarié, 1984), followed by secondary ports like Saint-Nazaire or Bordeaux with the development of Montoir and Le Verdon. The implementation of these programmes was reflected financially by an increase in State funds provided for the investment and operation of the port sector, as shown in Graph 1.

Table 2

Trends in operating and investment funding attributed to large maritime ports, since 2007.

In millions of euros	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Operating	–	47,6	53,0	58,9	58,5	58,5	58,5	53,4
Investments*	41,4	37,1	74,5	70,7	62	54,5	–	–

* Commitment authorization.

While the whole of France’s port system benefited from this policy and its accompanying funding at the time, State intervention was focussed especially on six ports, which became autonomous ports in 1965.¹ This reform allowed State supervision of these ports’ management to be reinforced. The authorities of the autonomous ports became a kind of public contractor of the State’s policy on ports. However, this policy was destabilised in the mid-1970s, in the wake of radical economic and political changes.

Firstly, from an economic point of view, the oil shocks of the 1970s and the ensuing crisis impacted strongly on the industrial-port zones, which experienced a first wave of deindustrialisation and falls in traffic (Damette & Scheibling, 1995). The shipping industry also experienced major restructuring in parallel, which affected the port sector. Containerisation led to the rationalisation of port services by shipowners and the concentration of maritime traffic on fewer ports, according to the hub-and-spoke model (Frémont, 2005). In selecting which ports to service, shipowners focussed on the quality provided by ports in terms of unloading speed and reliability on the one hand (Cour des comptes, 1999), and the adequacy of port infrastructure in meeting the continued growth in ship size.

In the face of rising European competition, French ports were penalised by their poor performance in the cargo handling sector (Cour des comptes, 1999 et Cour des comptes, 2006), and the absence of significant investment in port facilities. As a result, French ports’ competitiveness fell with respect to their European competitors, leading to a fall in their market shares: down by 21% for all traffic between 1989 and 2004, by 22% for solid bulk traffic and by 54% for all types of container traffic (Cour des comptes, 2006).² Ports of “national interest” were on the whole less affected by these trends than were autonomous ports, because the former are integrated into economic territories or areas having a regional dimension. These ports are therefore more specialised in certain types of maritime traffic and industries. Overall, ports of national interest saw their share of total French port traffic rise between 1970 and 2000, increasing from 13.7% to 20.4%, although the evolution of these ports varied substantially (ISEMAR, 2002). Calais is by far the largest, and experienced exponential growth in its traffic in this period, linked to cross-channel traffic.³ The other ports are much more dependent on some shippers and industries, and are therefore easily destabilised by changes in the economic outlook.

The stagnation of France’s port system during the last decades of the 20th century was accentuated by the disengagement of the State from this sector, both in terms of policy and finance. A break came with the changing presidency in 1974, which saw all reference to ports disappear from economic planning formulated by the French Planning Agency. In fact, the Seventh Plan launched in 1976 provided for no significant investment in ports, compared to previous plans, and was entirely geared to fiscal consolidation. The progressive rundown of planning which took place subsequently was not accompanied by the emergence of any other type of policy for supervising the port sector. In this context, State funding of ports fell off noticeably: as of the early 1980s spending fell to levels prevailing in 1960 (Cour des Comptes, 2006).

France’s Court of Accounts has on numerous occasions criticised the dispersion of State resources and the lack of clear policy guidelines (Cour des comptes, 2006 and Cour des comptes, 1999). As of 1980, the State undertook to modify its degree of involvement in ports. The aim was to concentrate State/central government resources in a small number of sites under its direct supervision, (including six autonomous ports and about twenty ports of national interest) with the first wave of port devolution that took place in 1983: the responsibility of more

¹ The six ports were Dunkirk, Le Havre, Rouen, Nantes-Saint-Nazaire, Bordeaux and Marseille-Fos.

² The *Cour des comptes* (France’s Court of Accounts) draws on non-public data provided by the *Conseil général des ponts et chaussées – Direction des transports maritimes, routiers et fluviaux*.

³ Traffic through the port of Calais rose from less than five million tonnes in 1975 to more than 40 million tonnes in the early 2000s.

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