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**The Role of Ideas in the Emergence of Convergent  
Higher Education Policies in Europe: The Case of France\***

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Abstract

How do ideas influence public policy? French higher education is a good case in point. It seems reasonable to think that the recent evolution French universities underwent resulted from the diffusion of the convergent discourse held by most European countries on the need for increased university autonomy and more self regulation. But no empirical evidence proves that this diffusion process occurred in the French case. Nevertheless, if the recent contractual policy in France can not be understood as the product of the emergence of new beliefs, of a new vision of the (European higher education) world, it certainly gave rise to the development of a new or paradigm. This leads us to revisit the relation of ideas and public policy in two ways. First in arguing that the causal link between them is not as unidirectional as generally stated. Second that change does not always happen through a paradigmatic revolution, but rather through an incremental process.

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During the last ten years, French higher education has undergone some substantial changes, as a result of muted and poorly mediatized decisions (Garraud 1990). The French ministry remains involved in centralized and standardized decision-making, but it nevertheless has questioned its national and synoptic education policy implementation (Friedberg et Musselin 1993) and adopted a more negotiated kind of intervention, more open to local particularities, to diversity and to the rise of stronger and more autonomous universities (Musselin forthcoming).

This has occurred since 1988 with the introduction of four-year contracts (*contrats d'établissement*) between the ministry and each university, the former providing the latter with some extra operational budgets on the basis of the strategic plan and with the introduction of priority-rankings that each university had to elaborate for the years to follow. Up to 1988, the budget allocation was very different and was essentially based on the agreement upon the curricula leading to national diplomas. This procedure was fundamentally discipline based<sup>1</sup> and the specific character of each university was neither recognized, nor taken into account. The transition from discipline-based policy (which originated from the previous organization of the French system into "facultés") to university-based policy, from authoritarian form of resource allocation to a negotiated one, occurred along with two other substantial changes. On the one hand the ministry developed a more regulative form of intervention rather than devising new national rules and controlling their implementation (Musselin 1995 ; Berrivin and Musselin 1996). On the other hand, many decisions were made to increase university autonomy (Lipianski and Musselin 1995, Musselin 1997).

This change is surprising for two reasons: it occurred very quickly and provoked no reactions although it was *a priori* incompatible with the usual ministerial intervention. Why did this happen ? This question is worth raising because this change is anything but superficial: it challenged the previous bases upon which the French university system relied for years and modified the characteristics of the state steering mechanism. Thus, if we use the three distinctive categories of change proposed by J.-J. Sylvestre<sup>2</sup> to describe the evolution of societal models, we are confronted here to a structural change, i.e. a change that<sup>3</sup> "[enhances] new behaviors and new social relations" and that is not simply an "automatic answer, stuck

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<sup>1</sup> This means that the process for the creation of a new curricula or for the maintenance of a previous one relied only upon the scientific/pedagogical quality of the project, according to the norms of the concerned discipline. Therefore, such agreements were evaluated by an expert of the discipline, and the amount of resources to be allocated to this curriculum was calculated on a per student cost, and classroom size which differed from one discipline to the other.

<sup>2</sup> P. Hall (1993) suggested a quite similar typology for change within public policies and distinguished minor modifications that do not change the goal or the instrument, those modifying the tools but not the objectives and finally those transforming the three constitutive elements of a public policy: the tools, the instrument settings and the hierarchy among the goals. For him, the third category belongs to the paradigmatic change.

<sup>3</sup> The sentences into brackets are quoted from the forward written par M.J. Piore in a book in memoriam of J.-J. Sylvestre (Gazier, Marsden et Sylvestre 1998).

on the existing structure<sup>4</sup>", or even "an organic answer that provokes structure change but in a way coherent with the principles guiding these operations<sup>5</sup>".

To understand why and how such a change occurred, two different perspectives can be developed. A first one would deal with the instrument for change the ministry used. One should then wonder why the "contractual solution" was chosen and, more generally, why this solution is the favorite tool for change within the French public sector and why it had quite a different impact<sup>6</sup> from one sector to the other (Berrivin and Musselin 1996) even if some convergences are also to be observed<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, I will simply raise these questions rather than explore them here ; instead I will choose the other perspective, which consists of explaining why the government put in place policies designed to meet these two goals: first, strengthening the university government and second modifying the relationships between the central administration and the universities. At a first glance, the answer seems rather trivial. The expanding literature on comparative higher education in Europe states that the EU countries are all directed towards these goals, as I will show in the first section of this paper. France being one of the last European countries leaning in this direction, one could expect the recent change to result from the influence of the other countries: one should thus be able to discuss how this influence occurred, how it has been translated into public policies and implemented. But, none of the empirical evidence I collected proves that the French policies have been inspired by the example of the other countries, as I will point it out in a second section.

This will lead me to argue that what happened in France can not be understood by asking how new ideas and representations induced a new policy. On the contrary, one has to understand how the introduction of an innovation (four year contracts in this case) gave rise to the development and the enrichment of a new corpus of ideas, which resulted from this new procedure. Relying on this case study, I will be able to discuss the relationships between ideas and public policies (third section): first, I will question the unidirectionality of the causal link that postulates that new policies depend on the emergence of new ideas ; second, I will discuss the model of paradigmatic change.

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<sup>4</sup> Changing the national prerequisites (the so-called *maquettes*) for the agreement of curricula leading to national diplomas is a typical example for this.

<sup>5</sup> The Savary Law for instance, which replaced the Faure law promulgated in 1968 after the May riots.

<sup>6</sup> That is the reason why R. Berrivin and I limited our comparison to the cases of the Ministère de l'Équipement and of university contracts and did not extend it to the contractualization experiences within the French public electric firm EDF-GDF (which R. Berrivin also studied, cf. Berrivin 1995): the way the contracts were implemented as well as their effects were very different within the Ministère de l'équipement and higher education on the one hand, and EDF-GDF on the other.

<sup>7</sup> See for instance Lorrain (1993) or the article published by P. Duran and J.-C. Thoenig (especially 582-583) on the "deep mutations" (*mutations profondes*) at the local authorities level: their conclusions on sectors covered by the decentralization laws are rather convergent with my own observations on a sector which was not concerned by the decentralization laws.

This discussion will lead to emphasizing the national characteristics of change in French higher education and to offering some clues that could explain why such a national process seems nevertheless convergent with what happened in the other European countries.

### **1. Convergences among European higher education systems**

Studies of higher education within the EU, or comparative higher education in Europe, arrive at very similar conclusions<sup>8</sup>: they all stress strong convergences among the perspectives developed on this topic by the different European countries and they all point out homogeneous discourses and shared points of view on the importance of post-secondary training, its role within the society, the stronger position universities should have, the evaluation they should undergo, and the new role the state agencies should exercise. It seems that all the European Ministers for Higher education would agree on the following points:

- higher education is a priority for the future of modern societies;
- it should produce and transmit knowledge, as well as it should prepare the younger generation to fulfill useful functions in society;
- the state budget will not be sufficient to cover all the needs and new resources must be found<sup>9</sup>;
- universities should become more autonomous and be able to decide for themselves and manage their development;
- they should undergo a posteriori evaluations;
- last, the state should develop some facilitatory actions instead of interventionist ones (using the terms proposed by Neave and van Vught 1991).

The time is over when the state was responsible for all. The universities should be more autonomous, look for more diversified resources and be accountable for what they do. This general framework, albeit shared and agreed upon within the EU, can be produced through different methods within each country. For instance, the observed convergences may result

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<sup>8</sup> The researchers on European higher education are a small community who meet regularly at conferences and quote each others frequently. This certainly strengthens the convergence effects.

<sup>9</sup> This theme is very frequent in the comparative work led by L. Goedegebuure *et al* (1993) on eleven countries (mostly European ones) and was already stressed by G. Williams in the study he led on higher education funding in the OECD countries (excluding Japan): « In general, there has been a growing interest by governments in the introduction of market types of organisation and incentives. It usually takes one of two forms. One is that public funding agencies are becoming increasingly selective, often taking the form of ‘buying’ services from higher education: the other is that universities and colleges are being encouraged to seek an increasing proportion of their finance from non-traditional sources » (Williams 1990: 88).

from two opposite processes oriented toward the same focal point<sup>10</sup>. One should distinguish, on the one hand, the university systems which are traditionally described as decentralized, but where pressure is brought to bear by national public authorities to follow a recentralization process that weakens the collegial university government they had developed, that strengthens the managerial capacity of each institution, and that supports budgetary cuts as well as new budget allocation criteria and procedures. Great Britain and the thatcherian reforms are a typical example for this. In a study on performance indicators in higher education<sup>11</sup>, Cave, Hanney, Kogan and Trevett (1988) stated that “the Government has radically changed the assumptions upon which higher education is to be conducted, and that the introduction of performance indicators forms part of a general shift from academic control over objectives and evaluation to control by the system and its managers” (1988: 27).

On the contrary, most of the other European countries are involved in a reverse process. They had centralized university systems on which the public authorities exercised a strong statutory and budgetary control. The state was also responsible for unilaterally defining the goals and the missions of the universities. In this case, the strengthened autonomy of the universities and the introduction of managerial tools resulted from decentralization process and from a redefinition of the role of the states, which, according to P. Maassen (1997): « have changed their comprehensive planning approaches and no longer consider themselves as the prime architects of the future, carrying like modern Atlases, the higher education systems on their backs. (...) To an increasing extent, the concept of self-regulation<sup>12</sup> is implemented in the European context, where the government defines a general framework within which the universities and colleges can elaborate the details themselves » (1997: 115).

Even if they seem contradictory, the decentralization and the centralization processes have in fact been converging toward the same perspective and objectives for the universities, the so-called “managerial revolution” (Neave and van Vught 1991), while the state authorities are developing more regulatory practices.

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<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed presentation see Kogan (1997) and Bauer and Henkel (1999).

<sup>11</sup> The rapid international comparison they develop in this book also stressed the convergent orientations of opposite processes and they also show that inverted argumentation may promote the same result: « Thus in the United Kingdom, performance indicators (PIs) are [...] clearly tied to notions of public accountability and form part of a major reconstruction of relationships and modes of decision making between the state, the central funding agencies created by the state, and the management of individuals higher education institutions. By contrast, in Finland, the 1987 legislation incorporates PIs as part of a revised structure for financing universities, but, starting from a system in which central control has been detailed and prescriptive, the authorities claim that PIs will enhance rather than reduce the freedom of universities. This claim is echoed in proposals made for the FRG and for the Netherlands » (Cave, Hanney, Kogan and Trevett 1988: 54).

<sup>12</sup> P. Maassen refers here to the opposition raised by F. van Vught (1989) between the rational planned governmental strategies and self-regulative ones. The latter rely on the « self-regulatory capacities of decentralized decision-making units » and « external regulating activities (...) limited to monitoring the performance of the overall system of the interrelated self-regulating decision-making units and to evaluating (and if judged necessary, changing) the rules which to a large extent define this performance » (1989: 39).

Moreover, if different paths may lead to the same focal point, the progression toward this shared objective may observe different rhythms and different temporalities. This the conclusion raised from a comparative study led on eleven countries<sup>13</sup> (including France): « When such a change in the coordination of higher education occurs, it does not follow the same rhythm everywhere. Australia, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom are, by far, the first on the way to the regulative state model. Denmark, Japan and Sweden are not far behind (...). [In Switzerland and Germany], it seems that the governments in both countries gave to the universities an autonomy that remains rhetorical. Nevertheless, the existing convergences among the governmental orientations on the issue of controlling and coordinating higher education are quite astonishing, while the fact that these reflections are similar from one country to the other does reveal the existence of a general tendency (Goedegebuure, Kaiser, Maassen, Meek, van Vught and de Weert 1993: 397 and 398) ».

Such differences are understood as small variations within a common move. All European higher education policies are said to share the same conception of what future university systems should be<sup>14</sup> and the model they are looking for includes two orientations: 1/ a redefinition of State intervention in order to introduce more regulatory functions rather than statutory ones, more evaluation rather than pure control<sup>15</sup>; 2/ an increasing autonomy for the universities that should improve their managerial and decisional capacities<sup>16</sup>. The contractual policy pursued in France since the end of the 80's clearly fits these orientations.

All these studies develop the same conclusions but they barely try to understand how these convergences occurred. In fact they often implicitly subscribe to a narrow functionalist analysis. What do they say ? Due to the fact that the European states are confronted with a welfare state crisis, with budgetary deficits, with unemployment and with a gap between training programs and the job market needs, they thus turned towards regulation and were willing to give more autonomy to the universities in hope that doing so would solve the problems they are facing. For instance, Goedegebuure, Kaiser, Maassen, Meek, van Vught

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<sup>13</sup> Australia, Canada (more precisely, the Ontario State), Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Japan, the Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland, the United States.

<sup>14</sup> This model is also connected to the notion of New Public Management (Braun and Merrien 1999).

<sup>15</sup> However, one can not speak of State disengagement, rather there has been a shift in the modes of action and of control. The latter are changing but they are not necessarily weaker: « One can observe in many countries [...] that the self regulative policy is parallel to the development of quality assessment, evaluation of the production, negative and positive incentives, determination of national priorities for training and research, budget retrenchment, development of contractual relationships, common action on the internal affairs of the universities (Goedegebuure, Kaiser, Maassen and de Weert 1993:17). »

<sup>16</sup> As shown by N. Brunsson and K. Sahlin-Andersson (1998) for the whole public sector, change within this sector involves the transformation of public entities into organizations, i.e. structures having their own identity, a hierarchy made of autonomous leaders, specific goals to attain, and the capacity to raise the means that enable them to reach such goals.

and de Weert state that « different governments respond in similar ways to the problems of their respective higher education systems (1993: 391) ». In other words, by and large they use a mechanical model that can be summed up in the following table (Table 1): for each problem, university autonomy is seen as a rational and efficient solution.

Identified problems	Results obtained through a larger institutional autonomy
Difficulties and limits of <i>a priori</i> control	More efficient control through <i>a posteriori</i> evaluation: universities are accountable
Problems in managing the quality of higher education	Introduction of quality assessment within universities
Costs inflation	Universities have to raise funds by themselves in order to cope with public budget retrenchment s
Poor adjustment between the diplomas and the job market needs	Universities have to promote internal innovation in order to find their own niche
Non productive bureaucratic rules	Regulation through competition among universities

Within this framework, governments give more autonomy to the universities in order to escape the dead ends produced by an interventionist and centralized state action. The new kind of control they can exercise<sup>17</sup> seems more acceptable within the new context.

Such an explanatory scheme presents many weaknesses. Some of them are well known and relate to the three postulates included in this scheme of analysis: 1/ political and administrative actors have been capable of correctly identifying the implications of their previous actions<sup>18</sup>; 2/ they have produced an enlightened diagnosis of the forthcoming context for higher education; 3/ they have undertaken a rational search for a new model<sup>19</sup>. Each of these assumptions has already been contested and largely discussed, I will not develop these criticisms here.

<sup>17</sup> Control is not suppressed but redefined: “ Thus, the advent of the Evaluative State is not limited in its repercussions to the relationship between higher education and external society. Since it demands new types of information, it also gives rise to new structures and patterns of authority through which that information may be sought and acted upon at the level of the individual establishment ” (Neave, 1988, pp. 16).

<sup>18</sup> The research led by H. Bergeron (1999) on French policies against drug addiction is a good illustration of the complexity of such processes. He shows that during the eighties, a large part of the drug addicted population escaped the existing care system, but that the actors involved in this system were not aware of it: they had not noticed that their clients were facing new difficulties (AIDS in particular), and that the persisting decline of their clients number was produced by the organization of the care system itself. Thus they neither looked for any alternative solutions nor introduced solutions they previously refused. It took many years for them to understand this and it occurred rather dramatically (when they realized that junkies were dying more frequently from AIDS than from overdoses), and this explains the reason why the introduction of methadone in France came so late.

<sup>19</sup> Here we agree with P. Lascoumes and J. Valluy (1996) conclusions on the "diversification of public steering instruments" and on what they called "conventional public activities" (*activités publiques conventionnelles* or APC). They reject the assumption that the developemnt of the APC results from a State voluntarist and enlightened policy and argue that conventional activities are not a tool in the hand of public deciders, that they are not a possible choice among a variety of other solutions and that they do not arise from an evaluation of the objective situation and of the available instruments.



Another weakness of this scheme is that it often does not distinguish between discourses and actions. The analysis of the policy implementation in fact reveals the diversity of national situations. The convergence is thus essentially a discursive phenomena, relying on the use of common expressions such as: autonomy, evaluation, regulation, accountability, etc. These convergences are to be found at the level of ideas, conceptions, representations, projections of the image of the future university<sup>20</sup>, whatever the concrete different ways that may be used to get there, whatever the distance each university system has to cover to reach this ideal, whatever the discrepancies among the practices and whatever the gap between what is said and what is done. But even if these convergences are more discursive than concrete, they exist and one has to understand where they come from. How did they emerge, how did a common discourse on higher education arise through Europe ?

The most plausible thesis<sup>21</sup> seems to be the diffusion of these ideas from one system to another, from one university tradition to the other<sup>22</sup>. Let us discuss the validity of this assertion.

## ***2. European convergences, a matter of imitation and of diffusion of ideas ?***

Can the convergences among European higher education policies be ascribed to diverse processes of construction and diffusion of dominant views, able to succeed not so much because they are rational (providing pertinent answers to specific problems) or efficient (solving these problems) but because they imposed themselves as legitimate normative and cognitive frames.? Has the emphasis on university autonomy nothing to do with managerial justifications or with developing an answer to some dysfunction ? Should we not understand those convergences as the result of the diffusion from one country to the other of an idea that is seen as legitimate and that, for this reason, is reproduced ?

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<sup>20</sup> One may wonder whether this common vocabulary is not an optical illusion dissimulating different meanings. For instance, no one can deny that the word « evaluation » appears in every European country, but the way this evaluation is conceived, the bodies in charge of it, its content, the way its results are used, differ enormously from one country to the other, as shown in the comparative study of J. Brennan (1998).

<sup>21</sup> Some other thesis can be raised. P. Haas (1989) for instance examines two other explanatory theories that could enlighten convergent processes among different countries. First coercion, which occurs when some States are obliged to follow the dominant views of other countries. Second, public pressure: political actors have to modify their programs and their policies in order to satisfy the public opinion. None of these thesis can fit the sector of higher education in Europe.

<sup>22</sup> One usually distinguish three university traditions in Europe. A first one is the Anglo-saxon one, and is to be found in the United Kingdom ; the second is the Humboldtian one which is characteristic for Germany and most North European countries ; the last one can be defined as the "latine" one, because it can be observed in France and in South European countries but it can not be reduced to a single and well identified model.

Two different theses provide positive answers to these questions. The first one has been developed by certain neo-institutionalist sociologists. Among the various works using this approach<sup>23</sup>, I will mostly rely on the text written by J. Meyer and B. Rowan in 1977 because the two authors describe the process by which institutional environments may arise and expand, but they also study their influence on the formal structure of organizations within a given sector. They stress that organizations develop by integrating institutional rules that are enforced " by public opinion, by the views of important constituents, by knowledge legitimated through the educational system, by social prestige, by the laws, and by the definitions of negligence and prudence used by the courts" (Meyer and Rowan 1977: 343). As such rules act for them as highly rationalized myths and they strongly constrain organizations.

Following this interpretation, the convergent shift within the EU countries would reveal an evolution of the institutional environment specific to the universities, and of their related public policies. This would mean that the rationalized myths that were considered as legitimate until recently would have been challenged and replaced by others. One could say that previously, universities had to appear as organizations able to simultaneously develop teaching activities (reflected by courses of instruction catalogs, departmental structures) and research functions (organized in research centers): as they respected the formal structures their environment legitimized, universities were able to obtain adhesion from their own members as well as from the society. It seems nevertheless that these myths have lost their legitimacy, that the institutional environment has undergone some changes and that universities have now adopted other rationalized myths, such as: accountability, responsiveness to societal needs, improved budgetary process, rationalized activities, reporting, less deliberative management, and more executive leadership<sup>24</sup>. Simultaneously state intervention would become less statutory and standardized, should no more rely on *a priori* and conformity controls but should be restructured towards more regulative and evaluative activities.

Such an explanation sounds all the more credible given that diverse phenomena reflect some existing pressures for change<sup>25</sup>. Here I refer here to the frequent criticism of universities by public opinion, media, employers and politicians. I am also referring to complaints about how the state intervenes, uses resources, behaves in a too regulatory or authoritarian way, makes

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<sup>23</sup> For a presentation of this approach, cf. the book edited by P.J. DiMaggio and W.W. Powell (1991) which regroups selected and fundamental articles. The editors' introduction is of special interest.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. for instance the reform recently implemented in the Netherlands. While deliberative bodies previously held executive authority, the latter is now exercised by some administrators (cf. Merrien, Buttet et Anselmo 1998 ; de Boer et Huisman 1999).

<sup>25</sup> One could nevertheless object that this pressure has not been stronger recently than it was years ago. I know no country officially satisfied with its higher education system. Few sectors are as often described as "in crisis" as universities are !

unconsidered expenditures, produces management failures, or implements inefficient reforms. In other words, one could invoke many factors to substantiate the claim that the institutional environment has been modified. But, stating that change occurred is not sufficient to explain why it did occur. Two points remain open.

First, how did this change happen ? Neo-institutionalists have been very active in assessing the influence of the institutional environment on organizations, but have done less to explain the process by which such environments are changing. Literally understood, their theory suggests, in fact, an extremely conservative (even conservatory) conception of the world. Once created, an institutional environment would be difficult to change as the myths on which it relies are neither consciously built, nor consciously institutionalized, or consciously transformed into formal structures. Individuals are subjected to such myths because they “ are highly institutionalized and thus beyond the discretion of any individual participants ” (Meyer et Rowan: 344). This means that an institutional environment undergoes some conformation dynamics that lead the different organizations of a given sector to adopt the same myths, but once this “ conversion ” happens, the process by which the myths may evolve remains mysterious. How is it that societies, whose members are embedded in institutionalized myths, may modify the latter<sup>26</sup> ?

Secondly, neo-institutionalists have a hard time answering another question as well: how can new myths impose themselves ? Not only shall some constituents (mysteriously, as seen above) free themselves from the myths in which they are embedded, and adhere to new ones: they have to enroll, to obtain new adhesions, and to institutionalize these myths. J. Meyer and B. Rowan (1977) evoked three processes to explain this diffusion phenomena, but none of them seems accurate when applied to the case of European higher education. No complex relational network exists amongst European universities: many contacts are to be found among European academics but they do more for the development of “invisible colleges” (Crane, 1972) than for the increasing autonomy of the universities. What ever concerns the interrelations between administrators, state agencies and university presidents within the EU, they still remain rare<sup>27</sup>. Nor can one say that the EU works as a centralized and integrated

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<sup>26</sup> One could say that new myths may develop when they create coherence between the specific domain within which they are operating and more general myths imposed over society as a whole, such as individualism (Meyer and Scott 1994). But this does not explain either how such global myths arise, obtain legitimacy and become institutionalized ! Let me add that this movement towards generalized coherence among different sectors is very close to the thesis of P. Muller about the interplay, at a national level, between a sectorial referential and a global referential. Thus, Muller speaks of “ a modification in the way citizenship is expressed, which occurs through new transactions between collective action and the individuals, the latter being more and more led to negotiate their place (and thus their identity) within complex systems ” (1995: 178-179).

<sup>27</sup> It is often said that French academics are not very present in European networks. For example, compared with their European counterparts, few French university presidents are active in the Conference for European Presidents.

organization for higher education, currently able to enforce a dominant model. Finally, there is no alternative organization (university or state agency) capable of imposing new institutional rules on the others. In this particular case, the actual process by which new myths are diffused is as mysterious as the one by which new myths may arise.

As such, the contribution of the neo-institutionalist approach is useful to explain the processes by which rules, formal structures, and rituals may be enforced within a specific sector and may produce convergent effects, but it is less useful for understanding change, i.e. how existing myths are losing their legitimacy, how new ones develop and diffuse. Now, to analyze the European convergence toward the "managerial revolution" and the "self-regulative state", we need a theory that can explain the process of change (how to shift from one legitimate model to another) as well as the processes of diffusion and homogenization (how different countries conform to the same institutional environment).

From this perspective we may learn a lot from the works developed by these political scientists who studied processes of emergence and change of belief and value systems or within the normative and cognitive frame of a specific public sector. Moreover, some of them very precisely studied how shared knowledge and norms arose among different countries. P. Haas (1989), for instance, described how a group of actors (defined as an "epistemic community") composed of experts from different countries and academic disciplines, succeeded in producing an array of shared knowledge, common beliefs, causal links, convergent values, that affect the way problems are perceived (the phenomena which will be qualified as "problems" and how they will be defined), as well as the variety of solutions that will be proposed. In the case Haas studied —Mediterranean pollution control— the members of this epistemic community acted as missionaries in the different national Ministries for Environment. Unfortunately, Haas did not study the conditions that were necessary for the diffusion of "shared knowledge" and for the experts of the epistemic community to obtain positions in which they could exercise some authority<sup>28</sup>. For this to occur it seems that the following prerequisites should be met:

- the experts must have individual qualities, and more specifically be very good at persuading others;
- there must be no competing expertise that could contest, invalidate, discuss the thesis exposed by the epistemic community;

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<sup>28</sup> P. Haas (1989) for instance does not explain the reasons why the Algerian state authorities who were opposed to any pollution control (in order not to slow economic development) finally recruited experts who were in favour of such controls.

- the national institutional arrangements (Weir 1989) should allow the recruitment of experts coming from this community and encourage their access to positions that enable them to be influential in the definition of the new public policies<sup>29</sup> ;
- it must be possible to transform the conceptions the experts are defending into new practices and new rules of the game;
- the problems raised by the experts have to be perceived as crucial by the members of the governments<sup>30</sup>.

Nevertheless, Haas's contribution is very helpful to understand the production of convergences among different countries and to stress the diffusion activity led by the experts to build links between the epistemic community, the ministry which recruits them and the political actors. It also clearly outlines how the experts use their dual situation —what H. Jamous (1969) called a *marginal-sécant* position— for the promotion of their ideas, for the "translation" (Callon, 1986) of their technical experiments into political contents, and for the "enrollment" (Callon, 1986) of other kinds of actors. Thus, Haas showed how reflection and exchange arenas promote the constitution of knowledge and the emergence of a shared belief system. But he also showed how the experts engaged in this process, become recognized and powerful actors in the concerned public sector. Haas concludes that “regimes may be transformative, leading to the empowerment of new actors ” (Haas 1989: 380).

If this analysis can be applied to European higher education, we should be able first to identify an epistemic community, and second to locate the diffusion channels between the latter and the state agencies in charge of this question within the European countries, and in France more specifically.

The first step is not as easy as it seems. On the one hand, there is no well-identified epistemic community, but different places where reflection occurs, ideas are developed and propositions made. Among them, one can quote the general divisions in Brussels, the meetings held by the Ministers for Education, some existing networks among European universities (through the Conference of the European university Presidents for instance), the research programs and conference launched by the OECD, or some research teams that produce scientific studies and act as consultants for some state agencies. On the other hand,

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. the notion of "administrative viability" identified by P. Hall (1989) as an important factor in the diffusion (or the non-diffusion) of ideas. Cf. also what M. Weir (1989) calls "institutional arrangements" when she compares the influence of Keynesian theories on economic policies in Great Britain on the one hand, and in the United States on the other. This notion explicitly refers to the recruitment and promotion processes (which criteria are important, is it possible to recruit "non conventional" candidates ?) and to the organizational specificities of each minister (degree of centralization, of hierarchy etc.)

<sup>30</sup> Cf what P. Hall (1989) calls political viability.

the individuals who participate in these forums<sup>31</sup> may be described as experts because they all are competent (in different ways from one place to the other) on higher education issues, but their expertise does not (most of the time) rely on scientific theories, as was the case for the epistemic community described by Haas. Last, all of them are already part of the higher education system. For this reason, it would be more convenient to speak of a community of "mediators", in the sense that B. Jobert et P. Muller (1987) use this term in their referential based approach<sup>32</sup>, i.e. as "the actor, as a group or an individual, producing the referential, what is considered as the "truth" at a specific moment" (Muller 1995: 161). Unlike Haas's experts, Jobert's and Muller's mediators rely less on their technical or scientific expertise than on their personal abilities in conceiving a new representation of the world, in convincing the other actors of the ineluctable reality of a necessary transformation, and in the powerful position they have already acquired, each of these competencies being very important to gain adhesion from others and to promote the emergence of a new "referential" for action.

As a matter of fact, the « epistemic community » for European higher education appears to have quite different characteristics from the one described by Haas for the Mediterranean pollution control. Moreover, one can identify some groups acting as such at the European level, but it is still much more difficult to locate the existing diffusion channels between these experts and the state authorities within each country. In the French case at least, none of the places involved in the construction of shared representations on the European level "produced" or "trained" mediators/experts for France. Unlike Haas's experts, none of the political or administration actors who defended and implemented the contractual policy took part in the reflection groups I identified above. Most of them, if not all, were not informed about what the other countries were doing<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, during the 1988 summer, knowing that the forthcoming university beginning term would be tough, when discussions were led among Lionel Jospin, Minister for Education, and the members of his Cabinet, on the content of the Minister's speech before the University Presidents' Conference (CPU) the following September, no mention was made of the reforms engaged at that time within other European countries. Nor did they consult the members of the European reflection groups or use the works of the latter. Thus, even if these groups shared the same belief in the managerial revolution and the self-regulative State, no concrete network existed to convey this model from the experts' groups to the French political and/or administrative actors. The only possible explanation would thus be that these actors had undergone an unconscious socialization, a transformation of their legitimacy and belief systems that occurred in invisible

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<sup>31</sup> Here I am following the distinction established by B. Jobert (1995: 19) between the political arenas (which for him are some places for negotiations) and the forums for public policies (which are defined as places for debates).

<sup>32</sup> P. Muller now describes it as a cognitive analysis of public policies (Muller and Surel 1998).

<sup>33</sup> This should not be understood as a criticism of the French actors. I observed the same ignorance among their foreign counterparts.

ways... This brings us back to the hypothesis of the modification of the institutional environment and back to the discussion and to the dead-ends we have emphasized above !

What have we learned from the points developed until now ? We have established the existence at the European level, of a convergent rhetoric on the desirable orientation of higher education in Europe and on the legitimate expectations for the university governments and for the role of the national states. We also pointed out that one can identify some reflection groups involved in the explicit formulation of these convergent perspectives, but that it is neither possible to locate the ways by which this common corpus of ideas diffuses among the different countries nor to understand how it exercises some influence on the political and administrative actors at the national level. The different available explanations we explored were not totally compatible with the empirical data we collected on the French case. And this is all the more surprising as France implemented a university policy fitting the European convergent orientations later than other countries. We expected to find evidence of this influence on the French political and administrative actors, but this was not the case.

### ***3. The relation between ideas and public action***

We are thus facing a paradox: the recent evolution undergone in French universities seems convergent with other European ones, but we can not identify the diffusion or imitation processes that influenced change in France. In order to understand this paradox, I propose first to look more carefully at how representations and expectations convergent with the European cases did in fact arise in France and the role this played in the introduction of the university contracts. This will lead us to discuss and somehow revisit theories of the relationships between ideas and policies and to suggest some accommodations for them.

#### **3.1. The production of a new “ doctrine ”**

I will quickly sum up some of the points I described in more detail elsewhere (Musselin forthcoming). The first point I would like to emphasize is the following: the introduction in 1989 of four year contracts between the ministry and the universities gave rise to an intense activism in the definition of a "doctrine" (I here retain the term used by the persons I interviewed at the Ministry), i.e. the formalization of principles, rules of the game, goals, practices enabling the implementation and the legitimization of those contracts.

The second point is that this « doctrine » developed after the introduction of the new procedure: all the evidence I collected show that the doctrine did not exist previously but was conceived subsequently, through an iterative process, which was particularly intensive between 1988 and 1993.

The third point to stress is that the « doctrine » had two important consequences. First, the progressive development of this normative corpus legitimized the four-year university contracts as a pertinent and accurate solution. This means that the contract was not only a tool, but became a project, made sense. It was an instrument from which some legitimization process occurred and which gave rise to new practices, new representations concerning the universities, a new philosophy of action on higher education, within the central administration, and at the same time it was a tool that could be used to reach such objectives.

Second, the production of the “ doctrine ” allowed the Parisian administration in charge of contractual policy (the DPDU) to dominate the other direction (the DESUP, which up to then occupied a central position within the ministry because it is in charge of all curricula leading to a national diplomas). This was particularly true between 1989 and 1991, because during these three years the DESUP resisted by mobilizing its material, structural and regulatory constraints and resources, but was completely unable<sup>34</sup> to develop a discourse or a vision that could have challenged the “ doctrine ” that the DPDU elaborated, formalized, and diffused. The lack of counter arguments, the fact that the DESUP members continued their mission without legitimizing it with explicit convictions, beliefs, and representations, the fact that the link between their actions and the sense of the latter was therefore very loose, all of this facilitated the emergence of new representations because they were unchallenged, and facilitated the adhesion to these new representations: for instance, none of the agents who were previously at the DESUP and who have been transferred to the DPDU felt uneasy with the new “ doctrine ”<sup>35</sup>. They did not feel obliged to renounce their previous beliefs when they were asked to participate in contractualization. They just felt that they had to work differently.

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<sup>34</sup> This was less true after the nomination of a new director for the DESUP in 1991. The latter tried to develop a discourse in favor of a national and centralized management of the diplomas. It slowed down the empowerment of the DPDU but never really succeeded in destabilizing and challenging the contractual "doctrine".

<sup>35</sup> Some members of the DESUP have been transferred to the DPDU through the reorganization. They have always been viewed with suspicion by the newly recruited DPDU's members as not really committed to the contractual policy. But, when I interviewed some of them in 1994 and 1995, it appeared that their adhesion to this policy was strong (although they could have felt free to express their disagreement because most of them were no longer working in the ministry when I interviewed them), that their understanding of the “ doctrine ” was very similar to the newly recruited members of the DPDU, and that they believed that the way they had managed the universities when they were at the DESUP, before 1988, seemed dated.



The last point to stress is that the impact of the "doctrine" can not be reduced to the enforcement of the contractual procedures. It has been broader, because it finally led to the formulation and to the promotion of a challenging cognitive frame, to the definition of a new referential. The latter relies on a new conception of the ministry role: instead of stating what general interest is, the central administration should work towards defining it along with the universities; instead of specifying the national norms and controlling their implementation, it should tolerate a greater variety of local norms and seek to make them coherent. The new referential has also brought forth a revised conception of the university role. Universities should become the place where local institutional policies are defined and integrated. In other words, arbitration between goals as well as adjustment between orientations and means should occur within the universities.

I must add that the empirical evidence we collected on this change showed that this new conception of the university has not been completely substituted the previous referential (which relied on a ministry responsible for issuing national rules and decision on discipline-based criteria): both of them are now to be found within the ministry where they more or less peacefully cohabit (Musselin, forthcoming).

### **3.2. About the influence of ideas on change, the reverse**

This summary of our empirical findings calls for two conclusions. On the one hand, ideas and representations have played an important role on the changes that have occurred in the French university system during the last decade. On the other hand, this role does not fit exactly with what has been described by most of the analysts who have been arguing that ideas are important in the formation of public policies. This is what I will discuss now.

Very schematically, one can say that the question of the influence of ideas on public action has given rise to two large debates. The first concerns the place given to ideas in the analysis of public policies. It opposes those denying the influence of ideas, to those who take ideas seriously. In a recent paper dedicated to economic policies, P. Hall (1997) distinguishes the three principal approaches to this issue and very clearly discusses the contributions and the limits of each. Two of these approaches do not take ideas into account: one because it is considered that the behaviors of individual or collective actors always result from the pursuit of their own interests ; the other because it considers, on the contrary, that such behaviors only reflect the impact of institutions. The third approach is the only one that states that ideas are important, but, as Hall points out, it consists less in unidimensional theories than the two first ones: while interests or institutions are presented as the principal —if not the unique— explanatory factors, ideas are often merely described as supplementary. Hall considers three

different positions of those who defend the importance of ideas. The first one takes ideas into account in its analysis, but they are not considered essential data<sup>36</sup>. The second looks at them as a more important explanatory factors, among others<sup>37</sup>. The third one treats them as a central feature<sup>38</sup>.

Another debate exists among those who think that ideas are important and it deals with the discussion of the explanations of how ideas influence public actions. As a matter of fact, comparative works on social or economic policies showed that the same ideological influence could lead to different effects, to different kinds of contents, to different rhythms and temporality of implementation from one country to the other, and attempts have been made to explain such discrepancies. In the introduction of the book he edited on the influence of Keynes, Hall (1989) stated that some authors explained these differences through the strength of the influence of ideas themselves; that others referred to the institutional figures of each country in which such ideas are imported; that still others focused on the mechanisms through which ideas gain access to powerful interest groups; and finally that some showed the influence of the constitution of political coalitions.

The case of European Higher education seems to be a good example to continue this discussion. I have already tried to explain the emergence of new representations arguing for more autonomous universities and less interventionist states and to understand how such ideas influence higher education policies and their implementation within some European countries. But the theoretical dead ends I outlined as well as the discrepancies I mentioned between what is suggested by the theories I discussed and what my own empirical data show, lead to revisiting the issue of the influence of ideas: my point will not be to deny the existence or the importance of this influence, but to discuss the way it works.

#### *a) When ideas induce change*

A common point is shared by all the approaches that "take ideas seriously", whether they stress that ideas are (or are not) the principal factor, whether they link their influence to the constitution of political coalitions, to the nature of the existing institutional arrangements, to the intrinsic strength of these ideas or to their viability: as a matter of fact, they all state the

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<sup>36</sup> P. Hall quotes for instance the contributions published in the book edited by Goldstein and Keohane in 1994.

<sup>37</sup> In this category, he quotes P. Haas works as well as the book he edited himself on the influence of Keynes (Hall 1989).

<sup>38</sup> Among the numerous references he quotes, one can find Hayward (1974), Salais andt Storper (1993) or Sabel (1995).

existence of a unidirectional causal relationship between some ideas and a public policy. This can be explained as follows:

	partially influence	
Ideas	strongly influence	some sectorial public policies, even if there are some variations from one country to the other
	completely influence	

The same holds true for the authors who defend a cognitive approach of public policies. They consider that the perception, identification, classification and registration of the problems to be solved<sup>39</sup>, as well as the ideas and beliefs that will be linked to these problems will strongly influence the frame of solutions<sup>40</sup> that will be developed to solve them.

The cognitive approach illuminates the construction of meaning, the causal links that some actors establish between some phenomena, the values and beliefs that they incorporate, and thus, the logics that become legitimate to follow. In France this approach has been developed by B. Jobert and P. Muller (1987) who used the notion of "referentials" to analyse public policies. For these authors, the referential is not only a representation, a set of ideas or an ideology, but it "articulates four levels involved in the perception of the world, that have to be distinguished, even if their are clearly linked with one with another: values, norms, algorithms and vision of the worlds" (Muller 1995: 158). Nevertheless, P. Muller adds that the last level, the visions of the world, is the more important of the four. It is the way by which the world is seen, and perceived, that will determine the tools, the actions and the interactions to develop. This is confirmed by P. Muller et Y. Surel when they write that "State action can be considered as the privileged place where modern societies, as complex ones, will raise the crucial issue of their relationship to the world, through the construction of

<sup>39</sup> The book of J. Gusfield (1981) on drunken driving is a very good illustration of this. The author noticed that this problem always called for the same kind of solutions which focussed on the driver's responsibility and on repression, and that nobody ever asked the automobile industry to develop safer cars (that could avoid severe injuries), that local authorities never developed public transportation in areas with bars, that no action on wine producers has been undertaken etc. To explain this focus on the driver and on his education, J. Gusfield refers to the way this problem has been identified, perceived and constructed. He described how alcoholism left the private sphere for the public one by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He then shows that car accidents also became a public problem but that at first no link had been drawn between drinking and driving. But the increase of car accidents led to the development of statistics on the accidents' causality. It is the construction of such data that brought forth the link between the alcohol level and the driver's behavior, and that built the perception of the problem in a way that focussed on solutions aimed at educating, modifying, and sanctioning the driver.

<sup>40</sup> Another good example is to be found in the contribution E. Bleich (1998) presented at the APSA conference in Spetember 1998. He argued that to understand the discrepancies between policies dealing with race in France and in Great Britain, one should analyze the influence of ideas on the problem setting in each country (what he called the problem frame), on the definition of the context within which the problem resolution is led (context framing), and on the search for solutions (solution framing).

paradigms or referentials, that is to say those arrangements of intellectual, normative or cognitive frames (*matrices*) that simultaneously determine the tools through which societies can work on themselves and the arena of meanings (*espaces de sens*) within which social groups will interact" (1998:11).

Authors that show the influence of ideas on public policies as well as those who use the cognitive approach, thus consider that meaning is prior to actions. They recognize that this may provoke the transformation of meaning. For instance, when the practices (behaviors, register of solutions, routines etc.) which were previously used are no more efficient in problem solving, or if they no longer make sense for the individuals, the latter will be led to discover, or to become more open to some new cognitive frames or ideas. But such a new frame has first to be constructed, such ideas have first to be established for new practices to emerge. These two processes are closely linked, but through a unidirectional causal relationship: to adopt a new vision of the world allows the "discovery" of new tools, of new solutions, and legitimates them. This is the reason why, the researchers using these approaches first focus on the construction of the new cognitive frame (or on the development of new ideas) and on the conditions that will allow them to get access to the political agenda, to be diffused within state agencies, to be used by the political actors...

### ***b) New practices and new ideas***

The approaches I just discussed are not to be rejected: they rely on very serious empirical studies in which the influence of ideas on the definition of new public policies was clearly to be observed. But they have to be augmented by other work. On the one hand, as shown by G. Pollet (1995), there exist some public policies for which no stabilized referential can be identified: relying on his own research on the first French retirement policies, he stated that they arose while numerous different representations were still competing with one another. On the other hand, some innovating practices, i.e. that do not belong to the traditional and legitimate register of solutions, were to be observed before the occurrence of a new cognitive frame or of new ideas. W. Salant (1989) for instance first argues that the New Deal did not comply with the Keynesian theory and second that the influence of Keynes on American economic policies were very weak until 1937<sup>41</sup>. Nevertheless, the New Deal was not a traditional policy. From my point of view<sup>42</sup>, this clearly shows that the New Deal included

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<sup>41</sup> "In fact the New Deal, at least during Roosevelt's entire first term, was not an exercise in Keynesian economics. (...) What might be called Keynesianism doctrines and practices was not accepted as part of government policy and respectable thinking until Roosevelt's second term beginning 1937 and lasting until expansion of defense and World War II expenditures in the early 40s" (Salant 1989: 35).

<sup>42</sup> Unfortunately, W. Salant did not draw any conclusion from his own observation.

some "a-typical" propositions (such as a budget deficit<sup>43</sup>) before the diffusion of and the adherence to Keynesian ideas.

These two examples, and principally the latter, reveal the biases introduced by most of these analyses because they overestimate the influence of the cognitive frame or of ideas on the individuals and their behaviors. They more specifically neglect the ability of the political or administrative structures (or, more generally of the institutions) in producing actions that are not coherent with the "dominant model", in escaping the "deterministic" weight the latter exercises on them. As a matter of fact, ideas, power structures, and institutions are less totalitarian than it is commonly agreed. In the same way as individual actors who are not perfectly coherent and rational (Cohen, March et Olsen 1972), institutions, and more generally collective actors, may tolerate some inconsistency (Brunsson 1993), some internal contradictions. This is why innovative practices may have occurred without being linked to any new representation of the problems to solve, the goals to reach, and the solutions to implement<sup>44</sup>.

Nevertheless one must add that the numerous innovations that develop within institutions, are most of the time very ephemeral and have no chance to provoke any important change with which to "produce" new conceptions or representations<sup>45</sup>. They generally have a very short life-time: most of them are quickly buried. And if they are not suppressed, they drift or are reformulated or absorbed by the legitimate logics of action, the last possibility for them being to survive but to be completely marginalized.

From this point of view, the introduction of four year contracts with each university in 1988, could have lengthened the already long list of innovations with no future. Like many of the latter, it was not expected, it created no controversy, no doctrine preexisted, it was not justified by any particular ideology or by ideas carried by a herald: there was no Keynes, no Malraux (Urfalino, 1996) to develop a new theory or to defend one philosophy of action

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<sup>43</sup> For W. Salant (1989) the deficit was not voluntary but the induced consequence of a particular context.

<sup>44</sup> The best example of this is that such innovations may be launched and defended by actors who will simultaneously develop very traditional policies. C. Allègre for instance engaged a reform of undergraduate studies that denied the universities the very autonomy his contractual policy was supposed to give them. Reciprocally, innovations may be introduced at the same moment and reinforce one another (because they promote the same cognitive and normative frame)... unintentionally ! As a matter of fact the 1992 reform of the central body in charge of the national management of the academic careers in France, the CNU (*Conseil National des Universités*), increased the university autonomy and was coherent with the contractual policy, but the goal of this reform was to "break the CNU" and not to strengthen the university contracts !

<sup>45</sup> Three experiments occurred before the 1988 contractual policy. Some university contracts were signed in 1975 but this attempt has been swept away by a governmental alternance. Some four year research contracts were introduced in 1983 but they quickly have been reformulated as a classical centralized policy, discipline-based and defined for immature and weak university governments. The creation of the *Comité National d'Evaluation des Universités* (CNE) in 1984 is another good example because it promoted the evaluation of the universities rather than the evaluation of the disciplines: the CNE developed this mission but it remained isolated and had almost no impact. For more details, see Musselin (forthcoming).

rather than another. My empirical study in the Ministry four or five months before the reelection of F. Mitterrand, and therefore before the nomination of L. Jospin as *Minister de l'Education Nationale*, did not allow me to predict that such a decision would be made in the following months, or that it would even be implemented. Nor did the research suggest that it would be carried on, during the first year, by most of the directors who were in charge of the universities<sup>46</sup> before the elections of May 1988 and for which the discipline-based intervention of the Ministry seemed so natural until then. There is no evidence showing that the contractual policy had been preceded by any change in the vision of the university world or by the adhesion of the Ministry agents or of the political actors to a European rhetoric on the future of higher education, or by a conversion of the French higher education sector to what P. Muller describes as the new global referential for the French society: the market<sup>47</sup>.

In fact, study of the contractual policy shows that it benefitted from a "window of opportunity" (Kingdon 1982), a set of favourable circumstances that I will quickly list<sup>48</sup>: the recent nomination of the Minister L. Jospin, just after the presidential elections, which was always a moment for the development of new programs; a ministry in search for new solutions as many of the "traditional" ones seemed impossible<sup>49</sup>; the political viability of the notion of « contracts » (Hall 1989; Musselin forthcoming); the role of the political entrepreneur played by C. Allègre (Padioleau 1982); the longevity of the Jospin-Allègre duo who remained in office for about four years, almost a record for a French Minister of Education; the institutional arrangements (Weir 1989) specific to this ministry<sup>50</sup>, which allowed the reorganization of the central administration in order to implement the new policy and the recruitment of some ad-hoc individuals.

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<sup>46</sup> The central administration reorganization was finished in May 1989, that is to say a year later and most of the directors who were in charge before were implicated in the preparation of the March 1989 circular.

<sup>47</sup> I do not agree with the interpretation of P. Muller that the contractual policy has to be understood as the adjustment of the higher education (sectorial) referential to the (general) market referential. The word "contract" certainly belongs to the economic vocabulary, but, nevertheless, the contractual policy did not work as a quasi-market mechanism.

<sup>48</sup> For a more detailed analysis, cf. Musselin (forthcoming).

<sup>49</sup> Nobody proposed a new law. The preparation of the 1984 Savary law and its difficult implementation forestalled such an initiative. Moreover the failure of the Devaquet law project in 1986 and the protests that occurred discouraged any attempt to introduce selection or self determination of university fees. Last, the members of the L. Jospin's cabinet knew (or shared) Lionel Jospin's aversion for any decentralization of higher education to the *régions*, a project that would also have been innovative but was not politically viable within the ministry.

<sup>50</sup> First it is a politicized ministry, which means that political shifts, or even a new minister, induce the departure of many directors within the central administration (Lochak 1986 and 1992). Moreover, this ministry is rarely chosen by the best ranked students of the ENA (*Ecole Nationale d'Administration*) and even less by those who are members of the most prestigious *corps* (*Cour des comptes*, *Inspection des finances* or *Conseil d'Etat*). It is thus possible to suggest that the *énarques* working in this ministry are less conventional, less in accordance with the traditional model of the French administration and more open to innovative practices.

Moreover, as noticed before, the success of the contractual policy relies also on the fact that the implementation of this new process has not been reduced to the production of a new official regulation (concretized by the March 1989 circular) and to some new files (each contract), but that it was sustained by the production of a “doctrine”, involving the formalization of procedures, criteria, norms, roles, goals, as well as the emission of arguments, explanations, causal links etc.

But this "doctrine" did not exist when the decision was made and it developed afterwards. This means that the dynamic between the conceptions, the ideas and the policy itself has been much more interactive than suggested by the studies and theories on the influence of ideas. Change did not occur from an evolution in the cognitive frame of the individuals or in their ideological beliefs, but arose from an innovative procedure (the contractualisation), a solution that did not belong to the usual and legitimate set of actions and whose implementation forced a transformation of the traditional frame of action.

The fact that such an innovative procedure may occur confirms that actors, and the organizations in which they are involved, are never completely embedded in a specific cognitive frame, an institutional environment, ideological conceptions or a defined structure of power and interests: some residual margin of autonomy allowing these actors/organizations to step out of the legitimate frame, always exists. Such a possibility is all the more important in sectors in which actions, relationships or routines are quite stabilized but in which there exist competing cognitive and normative frames. This situation is typical for higher education but in most other sectors as well. Nevertheless, most of the innovative actions are "absorbed" and do not allow in-depth and lasting change. A lot of supplementary conditions have to be met for a substantial change to occur. One of them, and probably the more important, being the production of a philosophy of action, of a doctrine allowing the legitimization of the innovative action and its institutionalization<sup>51</sup>. In this case, new practices give rise to new conceptions, contribute to the development of new ideas, which reciprocally legitimize and perpetuate such practices.

This conclusion in no way refutes the influence of ideas on public action, but certainly implies to admit a less univocal relationships between them and to recognize that there exists a reciprocal causal relationship. This means that public policies are not completely dependant on ideas and that they can even influence the development of ideas.

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<sup>51</sup> To say that the production of a “doctrine” is crucial for the legitimization of new practices does not imply that this doctrine is instrumentalized by the individuals, as argued by some of the tenants of the rational choice approach who incorporate ideas in their analysis and suggest that the individuals use ideas and reformulate them in a way that serve their interests. Cf. for instance F. Baumgartner and B. Jones (1991 and 1993).

### 3.3. Revolutions or evolutions ? Kuhn or Tinguely ?

The role of ideas in the contractual policy and in the evolution of the French university system also challenges the Kuhnian understanding of change mechanisms which prevails among the authors who take ideas seriously, as it is revealed by the analogies<sup>52</sup> developed between ideas (or referentials) on the one hand, and paradigms on the other (Jobert 1992 ; Hall 1993 ; Surel 1995 ; Muller and Surel 1998).

This parallel between the political processes and the scientific ones is easy to understand if we consider the definition T. Kuhn gave to the notion of paradigm. It corresponds for him to problems and research activities sharing the following characteristics: “ their achievement [is] sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of scientific activity. Simultaneously, [they are] sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve ” (Kuhn 1970: 10). Applied to public policy, this means that there is a political paradigm each time that some public problems and the policies which are legitimate to solve them share the two following characteristics: their achievement [is] sufficiently unprecedented to attract an enduring group of adherents away from competing modes of public action. Simultaneously, [they are] sufficiently open-ended to leave all sorts of problems for the redefined group of practitioners to resolve.

This analogy is all the more attractive when a public policy can be related to a specific scientific theory, as shown by P. Hall (1993) for the economic policies and Keynesianism. It is then possible to show that Keynesian theories involved a paradigmatic change within economics: it solved some of the puzzles raised by traditional macro-economics and allowed to escape from the dead-ends in which the latter was engaged. It can then be observed that, simultaneously, the integration of Keynesian principles within economic policies was a way of bringing new solutions to the problems that different countries confronted and that could not be solved with the public policies derived from the traditional economic theory. The

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<sup>52</sup> In a way, these analogies are very fair, as T. Kuhn used the notion of scientific revolution by reference to the political theory ! He wrote that “ the genetic aspect of the parallel between political and scientific development should no longer be open to doubt. ”. He even added: “ The parallel has, however, a second and more profound aspect upon which the significance of the first depends. Political revolutions aim to change political institutions in ways that those institutions themselves prohibit. Their success therefore necessitates the partial relinquishment of one set of institutions in favor of another, and in the interim, society is not fully governed by institutions at all. Initially it is crisis alone that attenuates the role of political institutions as we have already seen it attenuates the role of paradigms. (...) Like the choice between competing political institutions, that between competing paradigms proves to be active between incompatible modes of community life. ” (Kuhn 1970: 93-94).



transformation of the scientific theory may occur long before the change in the economic policy, because each process has its own dynamics: they do not have to overlap, even if they are linked. Nevertheless, they follow the same scheme: a "normal" phase, a crisis and a new "normal" phase. This can be represented this way:

classical economics paradigm -----> scientific crisis -----> keynesian paradigm

classical economic policy -----> economic crisis -----> keynesian economic policy

The dynamic of the two process is alike, but they are not of the same kind. P. Hall (1993) states that the first one is scientific and that experts play a fundamental role while the second<sup>53</sup> is sociological and relies less on experts than on political actors. He also adds that, as all scientific activities are not paradigmatic and do not constitute a "normal science", some public sectors are not "fully elaborated policy paradigms": the policy can not be associated with a specific idea and in this case, "the web of ideas affecting the direction of policy will be looser and subject to frequent variation" (Hall 1993: 291). One should thus distinguish the public issues which are very stable and within which public action is strongly correlated to a set of ideas, and the public issues which, on the contrary are not stable because they are characterized by competing ideas, that alternatively influence the content of the policies. Only the first ones, that can be qualified as paradigmatic would follow some change process whose dynamic could be compared to the scientific revolutions.

For B. Jobert (1992), and even more for Y. Surel (1995) such a distinction does not exist: every public sector should be considered as paradigmatic. Sectors within which instability is to be observed should be understood as reflecting a transitory period, either a pre-scientific phase characterized by competing theories, or a crisis situation characterized by the weakening of the existing paradigm (or referential). The process of negotiation, opposition, reformulation through which a new referential<sup>54</sup> will emerge is thus comparable with the discovery one<sup>55</sup> that solves scientific crisis. By the end of this process, every individual will

<sup>53</sup> B. Jobert developed the same idea when he wrote that a referential change implies the conciliation of contradictory requirements and that this "refers more often to a complex set of experimentations and of symbolic actions than to a transparent and rigorous intellectual procedure" (Jobert 1992: 224).

<sup>54</sup> In his research on the Nordic Cooperation, V. Simoulin (1999) showed that the referential content is not defined for ever and that before it emerges, a new referential experiences a lot of reformulations, modifications, etc. Even after it succeeds, it does not stay the same and still goes over some elaboration and adaptation processes.

<sup>55</sup> T. Kuhn states that "normal science, the puzzle-solving activity we have just examined, is a highly cumulative enterprise, eminently successful in its aim, the steady expansion of the scope and precision of scientific knowledge. In all these respects it fits with great precision the most usual image of scientific work. Yet one standard product of the scientific enterprise is missing. Normal science does not aim at novelties of fact or theory and, when successful finds none. New and unsuspected phenomena are, however, repeatedly uncovered by scientific research, and radical new theories have again and again been invented by scientists. (...) If this characteristic of science is to be reconciled with what was already been said, then

still not be convinced: some of them will still resist (as some scientists will always reject the new normal science), but such behavior will be responsible for their marginalization or their inability to win in the new context, and they will never succeed in avoiding the dominance of the new referential. They will neither succeed in preventing that a new vision of the world, and of how to act on it, replaces the previous ones.

Despite these differences, all the authors I quoted above tend in fact to distinguish two situations. The first one, and from their point of view the more frequent, applies to the public sectors characterized by a high level of coherence among the adopted measures. In this case, there exists what P. Sabatier (1997) called a policy core that overcomes the divergences and the various interests of the individuals involved in this sector and that links them by providing a shared understanding of the causalities, a shared perception of the problems, a shared hierarchy of beliefs, etc. The second situation, and from their point of view the rarer, applies to public sectors in which there exists no stabilized conception (referential) and in which the various public policies are not coherent one with another.

It seems to me that these two situations<sup>56</sup> in fact reflect two extreme cases, the latter being quite exceptional: it is only under very particular circumstances (or within a very short time) that no emerging coherence (or emerging strategy in Mintzberg's and Mac Hugh's (1985) terms) is to be found within the various policies of a specific sector. The first extreme case is more frequent, but does not last long. It describes the specific moment when the connection between the ideological views, the individuals representations, their perception of the problems, the legitimate solutions and the public policy content is highly coupled. But such periods of "normal" policies are short. The connection tends to quickly loosen because actions become autonomous from ideas: after a short period of time, most individuals behave without knowing anymore (or being anymore aware) of the set of ideas that gave legitimacy to their actions. Moreover: because actions are regulated by procedures, rules, routines, because they are located within institutions and included in the interactions individuals are engaged in, actions are more stable than ideas<sup>57</sup>. For this reason, the meaning of a policy may remain the same (because individuals keep behaving the same way, using the same solutions, and thus producing the same results) while convictions, beliefs, representations among these

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research under a paradigm must be a particularly effective way of inducing paradigm change. That is what fundamental novelties of fact and theory do. Produced inadvertently by a game played under one set of rules, their assimilation requires the elaboration of another set" (Kuhn 1970: 52)

<sup>56</sup> G. Majone (1992) developed a less revolutionary approach to the policy change and preferred the notion of research program developed by Lakatos to the Kuhnian paradigm in order to analyze the link between ideas and policy. He nevertheless considers that there exists a strong coupling between actions and what he calls the policy core.

<sup>57</sup> N. Brunsson developed a very closed conclusion when he stressed that « actions differ from ideas in that they are usually described not as something « existing » but as something recreated each time the particular action occurs. And yet actions can be more stable and can acquire a shape of longer duration than many ideas » (1993: 498).

individuals may not be consistent anymore<sup>58</sup>. As a consequence, in most cases, public policies may be coherent, but quite disconnected from the cognitive frames and theories borne by the individuals.

This is precisely what we observed in the case of the contractual policy within the French university system. And if we admit that the individual meanings may be quite independent from the policy meaning, we also have to admit a less revolutionary understanding of policy change. Paradigmatic change only occurs when the coupling between the actions and the cognitive frame is strong: in such a situation, change means going from one kind of coupling to the other. Therefore, it can only be a quite « violent » change. But, when the correlation is weak, change occurs less through substitution than through addition: in this case, change does not imply a total rejection of the previous practices and of the representations, theories or ideas that are linked to them, but it occurs by adding new practices, representations, theories or ideas. As a matter of fact, ten years after the introduction of the contractual policy in the French university system, one has to notice that some discipline-based practices still exist and cohabite, pacifically or not, with the university-based ones, even if the former and the latter each refers to very different understanding of what the State-university relationships should be and to divergent conceptions of the universities themselves. The introduction of university-based logics<sup>59</sup> within the ministry has weakened the discipline-based ones, but has not suppressed the latter.

What we observed does not look like a revolution but seems much closer to the analogy used by P. Lascoumes (1994) in “L’éco-pouvoir”, when he compared public policies with Tinguely sculptures and argued that public policies should not be seen as new processes because most of the time they are an assorted assembling of recycled elements. Transformations occur by adding new elements to an on-going process and this may produce new practices and new meanings. In this description, one should distinguish (which P. Lascoumes did not) among additions that do not affect the whole structure (i.e. automatic or organic answers in Silvestre’s terms) and the ones that could transform it. Following the points I made before, one should expect most of the latter to be unable to succeed in getting assembled. But the interesting aspects of this metaphor is that it suggests a more evolutionary, a less rupture-based conception for change. It is less dependant on discovery processes while the latter play such a crucial role for scientific or political revolutions to happen. The notion of recycling is also more accurate to outline that the added elements often come from ideas or theories that were present for a long period rather than newly

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<sup>58</sup> That is what I noticed above about the DESUP which maintained its discipline-based practices, but did not produce any legitimizing discourse.

<sup>59</sup> By this I mean the decisions made on the basis of the program of a specific university, while discipline-based logics refer to decisions made on the basis of the professional criteria within a specific discipline.

discovered<sup>60</sup> (Simoulin 1999). This kind of change may be radical even if it is not revolutionary. In the case of the contractual policy within French universities, the transition from the discipline-based logic to the university-based one is a very fundamental change. Even if it is better described as a drift from A to A' rather than as a renunciation of A for B, the addition of a new referential to the previous one is not just an incremental process (Lindblom 1959) or a change in small touches that would never affect the goals or the instrument settings. Thanks to the contractual policy, the Tinguely machine that is the French university system does not function any more in the same way. It does not follow the same path, it has another global movement and produces new sounds and new objects. It has experienced a structural change (Gazier, Marsden and Sylvestre 1998).

#### ***4. Conclusion: Implications for the evidences on European convergences***

Let me summarize the different steps which have been developed in this paper. I first noticed some apparent convergences between the change process experienced for the past decade by the French university system and the orientations followed in most European countries on this issue. I then show that, while this evolution occurred later in France than in the other countries, it can not be argued that they resulted from the diffusion of the same discourse and the same vision of the academic world throughout the European Union. I thus tried to analyze how this new referential for action developed and became institutionalized in France: this led me to observe that, on the one hand, this referential has not been a prerequisite for new practices and behaviors but, on the contrary resulted from them and that, on the other hand it did not displace the previous one but instead cohabits along side it. I think that two main conclusions can be drawn from this discussion.

The first one confirms the impact of existing institutions on change. The last section of this paper clearly establishes that the change process within the French university system has been a very national one, i.e. depending on the French context. There are two reasons for this. The first one is that the new referential developed on a typically French tool: the pluriannual contractualization, which is a common “solution” in all attempts for change within the French public sectors (Berrivin 1995; Gaudin 1995; Berrivin et Musselin 1996; Lascoumes and Valluy 1996). Because the referential did not exist as such before the introduction of the

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<sup>60</sup> The change introduced by the end of the eighties in the French university system can not be reduced to a discourse on the development of institutional university policies, on university autonomy, on the weakening of the State intervention, because, in a way this discourse is an old one. It was already present in the debates surrounding the reforms by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Weisz 1983) or during the meetings of Caen in 1954 and 1964.

“contract solution” and because it instead arose from it, the national specificity and the nationally-located development of this referential are revealed.

The second reason has to be found in the cohabitation of the previous referential (discipline based) and the new one (university based). The fact that the latter did not replace the former and that change occurred through a more or less easy agregation rather than a revolution also outlines the national component of this evolution. This change is crucial and deep but it is not disconnected from the past of the French University and for this reason, it can not be so easily compared with the transformations that occurred in other countries. As a matter of fact, the French change can only be understood within the French institutional frame, i.e. within the specific characteristics of public sector’s evolution in this country and within the peculiar features of its university system.

This statement (which is probably also true for the other European countries) calls for another conclusion, which is more prospective and which questions differently the issue of European convergence. Instead of trying to understand how the thesis of the “managerial revolution” and of the “self regulative state” influence European higher education policies, one should reverse this perspective and ask whether these convergences are not (at least partially) fed and formalized by higher education policies, and whether the role of the arenas or epistemic communities we identified at the European level is not first of all to interpret these policies, to reformulate them into a shared terminology, and to *a posteriori* build a convergent rhetoric? This can only be expressed as hypothesis that should hopefully be explored through different studies that analyze how these arenas or communities work, and that, contrary to my own research strategy<sup>61</sup> and to most studies, should try less to show the influence of the ideas and representations produced by these reflection groups on the formation of new policies, than to understand how such groups are informed by the latter, reformulate them and intervene afterwards (and not only onwards) in their legitimation and consolidation process.

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<sup>61</sup> During the interviews I undertook to analyze the genesis of the contractual policy, I had in mind the unidirectional causal scheme I discussed above. In these interviews, I thus tried to find the origin of the contractual policy, to identify the influences that have been exercised, the networks they used to be diffused, etc. Confronted with the lack of data on these aspects and, on the contrary, to the amount of information I collected on the “doctrine”, I finally realized that new practices came first. Rather than search for the origin of the contractual policy, it would be interesting now to study how the “doctrine” has been diffused then to the arenas and epistemic communities at the European level, whether it influenced their representations and whether they translated it in their own vision.

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