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Public policy research: deconstructing the French touch

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This paper, written for the Forum section of *Critical Policy Studies*, is a personal account of public policy analysis in France which was first presented at the 2010 Grenoble Interpretive Policy Analysis conference. It aims to complement the piece published in this journal by Philippe Zittoun in 2010. It is not fully referenced, and only reflects the author's limited understanding and knowledge of different traditions of research in the French context.

In contrast with many analyses in the social sciences that invent, or reinvent, some kind of 'French touch', I argue that there were always many contrasting intellectual traditions that were drawn on to analyze public policy in France, that none of them was dominant, and that many of them were not specifically French. Also, analysis of public policy was mainly developed within political science and sociology, where postmodern literature from Lyotard to Derrida was more or less non-existent The 'French theory' tradition, as invented in the United States, has had little or no influence on public policy analysis, with the important exceptions of Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu.

In other words, this short paper aims at rebutting the continuing external 'intellec-tual commodification' of French policy studies, while engaging with the unique sets of intellectual traditions that have emerged in France, with their cross-influences, in the study of public policy

Keywords: policy analysis; France; intellectual influences; political science; Sciences Po

Public policy as a marginal question for French political science until the 1980s

In France, public policy was originally mainly a question for scholars of the law, as part of their subject. Then, political scientists and sociologists got interested.

Political science emerged as a discipline with the creation of the French Political Science Association in 1949 and the main journal, *Revue Française de Science politique* in 1951. First, political science emerged in a strange organization, the Fondation Nationale des Sciences Politiques, a public foundation created after the war with a fusional link to the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (one of the elite *grandes écoles*, the gateways for top civil servants), both of them being known as Sciences Po. It was here that pioneering scholars did their work, and it has remained ever since the institutional center of French political science. Sciences Po started the first two leading research centers in political science in the early 1960s: one on international relations and area studies; the other on elections, political behaviors and political institutions. Behavioralism was particularly strong. There was no such thing as research on government or public policy, except at the margins, for instance

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in agriculture policy, but in relation to interest groups in this area. Sciences Po was run for decades by an uneasy alliance between a group of civil service elites and leading political scientists. Unsurprisingly, questions of government and public policy were taught and discussed by top civil servants. Political scientists were either not interested, or their input was seen as lacking legitimacy. Sciences Po failed several times to develop research in public policy. Such work only started seriously in the 1990s.

Elsewhere, political science developed as a discipline within long-established law faculties. Thanks to the towering presence of a leading scholar, Maurice Duverger, political science became an autonomous discipline in the 1950s, though still within law faculties, hence the old fashioned behaviors and values in terms of hierarchies, the disdain for empirical research, and the very slow awakening to the fact that there was such a thing as political science studied in languages that were not French. In that world of law faculties, the question of public policy was more or less non-existent: law was the science of government; political scientists would concentrate on institutions, elections, political parties, and the state.

In other words, within French political science, the analysis of public policy was marginal for a long time; and then, more or less until the mid-1990s, was seen as not very 'noble', as a sub-discipline in comparison to the study of political parties, social movements, elites and institutions.

However, important books about public policy were published in France, although not by French scholars. Important research into public policies in France was written up by American and British scholars, who identified a 'state centered' model of public policy, a French exceptionalism. Over the years, books by Stanley Hoffman, Andrew Schonfeld, Mark Kesselman, Suzanne Berger, Peter Hall, Jack Hayward and Vincent Wright, to name but a few, made very important contributions to the understanding of public policies in France, usually developing a comparative, neo-institutionalist framework.

Innovations at the margins of political science and on the periphery

However, in the margins, in other disciplines, a lot of work was started in the late 1960s and early 1970s. These research projects were not coordinated; and this very brief review does not aim to be exhaustive but to provide elements of information about different intellectual traditions; so there is no hierarchy in the following presentation.

A first group of very strong empirical research studies of policy was started in a centre created by Michel Crozier, the Centre de Sociologie des Organisations, within the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in the mid-1960s. Michel Crozier had spent time in the United States, had been very close to Harvard in the 1960s, and knew very well not only the work of Simon, Barnard and March but also that of Lindblom and Allison. He developed his own theoretical model based upon systemic interactions between strategic actors to analyze organizations. He gathered a very talented group of young scholars around him in the mid-1960s (Pierre Grémion, Jean-Claude Thoenig, C. Grémion, Erhard Friedberg), and together they produced many excellent analyses of ministries, policies and administrations, with a very strong bias against any cognitive dimension, everything being related to power games, strategies and interactions within organizations. The state did not exist as such in this tradition, and the group remained very opposed to constructivism and to the understanding of laws and institutions. As sociologists, they rejected the analysis of politics as an autonomous sphere. This group remains active and productive today, and has been producing interesting public policy research about university reforms, the management of risk, and health policies (Christine Musselin, Olivier Borraz, Henri Bergeron).

Secondly, as is often the case in the French university system, innovation took place beyond Paris, that is at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Grenoble, a joint venture between Sciences Po, the University of Grenoble and the CNRS. Influenced first by Gramsci in the 1970s, Lucien Nizard and his group – which included two younger scholars, Bruno Jobert and Pierre Muller – developed an original analysis of French indicative planning which comprehended most of French public policy in the post-war period. Jobert and Muller then developed the idea of the macro cognitive and normative framework, the *référentiel*, which oriented most public policies at a given historical period. This *référentiel* was a macro variable, explaining various policy changes in different sectors. For this group, policies do not change because of interactions between actors: the *référentiel* only makes sense in relation to a more global set of meanings organized in a coherent way and dominating a given period.

The group also linked public policy to the act of political regulation, which aimed at providing some political order in a social world full of contradictions, but which never really succeeded. The focus on the state was therefore essential, and the group's main book, *L'Etat en action*, was published in 1987, with a conception of the state as both a being and an active agent. Jobert's book on the neoliberal turn of policies in 1994, which compared several countries, is also a good example of this group's work. In some ways, this original and powerful framework of analysis belongs to the same intellectual family as Peter Hall's analysis of paradigms or Paul Sabatier's advocacy coalition framework. The emphasis is very much on the state, on the cognitive dimension, on political regulation and state elites.

A third body of research was initiated post-1968 by a group of critically oriented administrative lawyers (Pierre Legendre, Jacques Chevallier, Daniele Loshak, Francois D'Arcy, Jacques Caillosse), all from the left, who emphasized the symbolic dimensions of institutions and their domination patterns, and played with some conceptions of public policies. The group developed a sophisticated critical analysis of public administration, shaping the understanding of public policies. Pierre Legendre's influential book on the French state develops a kind of mysticism in relation to its subject. In that tradition, what matters is the state and the administration, their elites, the organizations, more than public policies as such. Many early works about public policy were therefore very much influenced by this emphasis on the administration, on the role of the French state in the making of the French nation. This influence has remained in research on immigration policy, decentralization, the courts, and so on.

Fourthly, Marxism was very powerful during the post 1968 period. It proved fruitful for scholars who studied economic policies and urban policies (Edmond Préteceille, Christian Topalov, Suzanne Magri, in the Centre de Sociologie Urbaine, but also beyond Marxism such as Sylvie Biarez or Dominique Lorrain). They focused on the outcomes of policies, the making of inequalities, social segregation, private developers and housing policies, and the rise of an urban capitalism related to utility networks. They started excellent empirical research on the theme of 'who benefits'. Beyond the urban group, scholars like Nicos Poulantzas, influenced by Althusser and Gramsci, provided a robust analysis of the state which influenced public policy research. Some other neo-Marxists followed the diverse, complex, often contradictory and stimulating legacy of Henri Lefevre. Lucien Sfez in particular, was interested in complex systems and wrote a major critical book *Critique de la decision*, in 1973 on the illusion of rationality. He did more work on technologies, symbolic power, and communication, and was influential on policies regarding infrastructures.

Fifthly, another research tradition research was more particularly inspired by Michel Foucault, but without having any connection with the research done by N. Rose and P. Miller in the UK. Using Foucault's seminal insights on governmentality, various scholars

worked in a critical vein on law and public policy. They developed a critique of the state security apparatus, of health, gender and sexuality, and of family policy, justice and prisons. Pierre Lascoumes in particular started from the analysis of prisons, and went on to study patient movements in health policy and environment policy. He also developed a critical analysis of the making of law and the role of policy instruments, inspired by the Foucauldian idea that one had to work on the activities of states, the concrete *dispositifs* of public policy, and later developed this into the political sociology of policy instruments. Lascoumes also spent parts of his career in Canada and in Switzerland.

Sixthly, some sociologists emerged in the late 1970s who were massively influenced by classic US literature and policy analysis on the one hand, and by Max Weber on the other hand, with a focus on bureaucracies. Scholars like Jean-Claude Padioleau, Jean-Claude Thoenig and Patrice Duran produced important public policy research, taking into account the insights derived from US implementation research. Their main books were written in the 1980s, and they wanted to differentiate themselves from the sociology of organizations but also to reject the state/elite view of policies put forward by political scientists. Padioleau's book *L'Etat au concret* in particular offered a remarkable set of cases studies of the construction of policy issues and their implementation, a very astute book. In a different way, but still on the periphery, a young political science professor in the law faculty in Rennes (Brittany), Yves Mény, had the opportunity to go to Cornell University in the late 1970s. He became the leading public policy scholar in French political science by developing excellent comparative public policy research programs and progressively taking into account the Europeanization process. He eventually went to the European University Institute (EUI) in Florence, where many young European scholars later had a spell in the Schuman Centre. In the 1990s, that was the most dynamic place for public policy research in Europe, where most comparativists spent some time.

Also, a scholar like Pierre Birnbaum, who was close to Charles Tilly, was a major influence because of his important research project on the comparative sociology of the state and the differentiation and autonomization of policy and state elites over time. Although hugely influential because of his dichotomy of the strong state/weak state and his precise analysis of French state elites, he remained uninterested by public policy research, as his main area of interest was the historical development of the state and the bureaucracy.

The institutionalization of public policy research: from the late 1980s onwards

By the late 1980s, a handbook of public policy had been published by Thoenig and Mény, some programs had been established in Grenoble, in Bordeaux and at Sciences Po in Paris, and comparative research had become more systematic and been reinforced by EU incentives. Public policy became a very dynamic and innovative area of research in France, and gradually became a fully institutionalized sub-field of political science and sociology, for instance in the Traité de Science Politique Published in 1985.

As is often the case in France, some scholars from Grenoble, Bordeaux and Rennes, and others, came together in Paris. The young scholars either were trained in foreign universities or spent time at the EUI in Florence. Pierre Muller and Jean Leca in Paris, in particular, encouraged that new generation to develop comparative research, a complete change for French political science: Richard Balme was at Chicago; Virginie Guiraudon was at Harvard; I was at Oxford; Patrick Hassenteufel, Andy Smith and Emmanuel Negrier developed comparative research; and Bruno Palier, Yves Surel and Virginie Guiraudon went through the EUI in Florence. Important comparative working programs started dealing with social policies and the welfare state (B. Palier, C. Martin, A.M. Guillemard).

Those working on these programs became the most dynamic and international group of French political scientists. They explored different theoretical avenues, from the role of ideas (Muller and Hall's influence), to policy networks, neo-institutionalism, policy instruments, governance, and the politics of attention. This younger generation is now part of the discussion on the Europeanization of policy processes, comparative political economy and the Baumgartner and Jones agenda program, rationalities of the state and critical accounting, justice and the police, and interest groups and state reforms (Philippe Bezes, Cornelia Woll, Emiliano Grossman, Sophie Jacquot, Pauline Ravinet, Romain Pasquier, Gilles Pinson, Charlotte Halpern, G. Salles, J. Rowell, Jacques De Maillard, Eve Fouilleux, Bastien Irondelle and Sabine Saurugger).

However, French political science in universities became more organized around the constructivist group of political scientists (the core being at the University of Paris I), and these were heavily influenced by Pierre Bourdieu and a particular type of political sociology that emphasized the genesis of policies, conflicting practices and usages, the role and habitus of particular elites, the instability of the institutionalization process, struggles within the political field, and the social trajectories of various elites in order to explain policies. A group around Michel Offerlé specialized in what was called '*socio-histoire*' (with a new journal *Genèse*) on the social construction of interest groups and the micro story of various state interventions analyzed at the origins (see Pascale Laborier, A. Spire, H. Michel for recent research) or the role of street level bureaucrats (Vincent Dubois, Philippe Warin in a different way). This has produced many important monographs on the origins of different segments of state intervention. Connections have been made with research on social movements in order to work on the social construction of policy problems and the setting of policy agendas. A different group of '*socio-histoire*' is developing a research agenda around the '*savoirs de gouvernement*', another Foucauldian idea developed in particular in Grenoble and Lyon (Olivier Ihl).

Finally, sociologists in France, who for a long time were not interested in public policy issues, have developed significant contributions with widespread influences on social sciences, not just public policy research. The constructivist sociology of Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thevenot has been very influential in promoting understanding of some microdynamics of the implementation of policies through the understanding of various 'spheres de justices'. The Sociology of science technologies approach of Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, and the actor network theory, are gradually inspiring excellent research, in particular in environment and science public policy (Yves Barthe, Madeleine Akrich).

Also the pragmatic sociology developed by Daniel Cefai and Dany Tromm at the EHESS (Ecole des hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) has produced important work on the construction of policy problems and the dynamics of framing.

Conclusion: who cares about a 'French touch'?

As briefly sketched in this review, research into public policy in France has been very diverse and pluralist, and has moved between various disciplines and used all sorts of theoretical framework. And this is not an exhaustive review.

The traditions of French public policy research discussed above were related to their particular contexts at different periods. This short paper has pointed towards some institutional characteristics, or divisions of labor between disciplines, for example. Also, as has been made clear, a good deal of the research has been influenced over time in all sorts of ways by ideas coming from Switzerland, Canada, the UK, the USA, Germany, Italy and many more. The interest in discursive analysis and post-positivist thinking by

Philippe Zittoun and his group in Grenoble is yet more evidence of innovation, and of the hybridation of ideas developed elsewhere and then articulated in a given context to produce interesting research designs and research results.

What is the point of inventing a 'French touch' then? Two reasons might be put forward. Firstly, as when the Americans invented a 'French theory', inventing a 'French touch' may be a successful internationalization strategy, creating an impression of being abreast of trends, and having a strong theoretical background. Secondly, it may also be a defensive strategy to pretend that there is a unique, exclusively French tradition in understanding public policy which should be respected, and this would justify not doing comparative work or not interacting with other scholars.

What is clear from this review is that many trends and international networks have influenced French public policy research and have been influenced by it. Secondly, one could point towards some common characteristics of the French situation, like the complex interactions between political science and different sociological traditions, the interest in the historical development of public policy, the more or less complete lack of interest in rational choice approaches, an emphasis on the political dynamics of public policy, and the marginalization of instrumental policy analysis and the best practices associated with it. These were configurations, actors, institutions which had particular meaning at some given period, but in some case the influence of these on a particular set of original ideas is far from obvious, and would have to be shown precisely.

What is striking, by contrast, is the scope of the different intellectual traditions progressively mobilized to study public policy in social science, making perilous, or irrelevant, the characterization of an encompassing homogeneous or dominant 'French touch'. The *Dictionnaire des politiques publiques*, edited by three young scholars (Boussaguet *et al*. 2010), provides a good overview of the diversity and controversies within public policy research in France. It has become the main intellectual instrument for public policy students. Tellingly, many entries and the majority of references are not French. There are still some original intellectual traditions in France, and influential scholars; but the label 'French touch' seems pretty inappropriate.

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