

INSIDE THE AUTONOMOUS STATE
ELITES, IDEAS, AND POWER IN THE REFORM OF FRENCH HEALTH POLICY

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This paper was produced with the support of the
Laboratoire Européen Associé ETAPES
Université de Montpellier 1 (CEPEL) – Universidad de Barcelona

Prepared for presentation to the 15th International Conference of the Council for
European Studies
Chicago, Illinois. 30 March 2006

ABSTRACT

Like all industrialized states, France faced two distinct challenges to its system of social welfare in beginning in the 1980s. The first was budgetary and demographic, bringing rising costs and structural deficits. The second was ideological, as the rise of “neo-liberal” economic and political doctrine challenged the centrality of the state itself. In France, all sides of this struggle were represented within the state by competing elite groups. A simple assertion of “state autonomy,” thus, tells us little about ultimate outcomes. Models of bureaucratic politics, meanwhile, fail to explain how preferences of state actors evolve over time. This paper combines the methods of institutionalist analysis and the sociology of elites to look inside the black box of the French state. We identify key groups of policy makers and track both their policy preferences and the results of their efforts from the mid-1980s through the present. Our conclusion is that the challenges cited above led to the consolidation within the Ministry of Social Affairs of what we label a “programmatic elite,” whose influence derived less from the positions held by its members than from the coherence and applicability of its state-centered policy model – a model, critically, that was not simply conservative but included significant innovations. This programmatic elite for social policy largely prevailed in its internal competition with rival elites. Its preferred policies are reflected in the reforms launched by successive governments of both left and right since the mid-1980s.

This paper is a working draft, circulated for comment only. To contact the authors:

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Inside the Autonomous State

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The purpose of this paper is to contribute to an ongoing discussion among students of public policy on the question of institutional change (Pierson, 2004; Streeck and Thelen, 2005), and to demonstrate how linking this problem more explicitly to considerations of power and authority can help us better understand the process of incremental state transformation. We look here at the role of political-administrative elites in decision-making for social welfare policy in France since the beginning of the 1980s, employing a method that combines the sociology of actors (looking at social background and professional trajectories) and the analysis of ideas (the cognitive and normative representations held by actors). We conclude that, in this particular case, the agent of change was a cohesive group state policy managers who prevailed in the struggle for authority against competing state elites. It is inside the autonomous state, thus, (and not in the interactions between a unitary state on the one hand, and “society” or “interests” on the other) that we must look for the mechanisms of change in French social policy. We end the paper with a discussion of the extent to which this approach may be applicable more generally.

Introduction : The Role of a Hypothesis-Generating Case Study

A brief discussion of the intellectual origins of this paper is important to understanding both its form and its significance. What we have done is to re-examine and, to a certain extent re-evaluate, evidence collected in the course of a major empirical study (Hassenteufel, ed., 1999; Genieys and Hassenteufel, 2001; Genieys, 2005a)¹ with a view to generating testable comparative hypotheses beyond the scope of the original research. Our intention in proceeding in this manner is threefold: we present the findings of the French case in such a way as to contest a number of widely-held misconceptions about it, we suggest how this might improve our understanding of the empirical topic at hand – the reform of social protection regimes in Europe and North America – and, finally, we seek to contribute to bridging the gap between inductive and deductive approaches to the study of public policy.

We begin this paper, thus, with a presentation of the conclusions of the original study. Putting these findings into perspective, we then discuss their relation to standard explanations both of “welfare state” issues and of the specific case of French policy-

¹ The ideas presented here are the result of a length intellectual exchange with Patrick Hassenteufel around the articulation of elites and public policy in the social welfare sector. The empirical data, excerpts from interviews and sociographic statistics were produced by a field study coordinated by Patrick Hassenteufel and sponsored by the French government’s *Mission Interministérielle pour la Recherche* (MIRe) completed in June 1999. As discussed in the final section of the paper, a comparative follow-up study (also sponsored by the MIRe), is now underway adding German, Spanish and British cases.

making. Received models of corporatist governance or of state autonomy, to say nothing of the universally-held but largely content-free notion of “French exceptionalism,” we find, do rather poorly as explanations for our empirical findings. A more flexible explanatory framework is required to make sense of them. The paper concludes by laying the bases of such a framework, putting forward explicit hypotheses for further comparative research, and discussing how and under what circumstances these might be tested.

Part One : Inside the Autonomous State – the Social Welfare Policy Elite²

Insofar as social welfare policy is concerned, the electoral program of the victorious French leftwing coalition in 1981 proved impossible to implement. It’s twin motivations were to stimulate growth through a neo-Keynsian program of public spending, and to reinforce social services for their own sake and without reference to cost – a point of view famously symbolized by the pronouncement of Minister for Social Affairs Nicole Questiaux that she did not propose to act as “minister of accounts.” The so-called “common program of the left,” thus was based on massive across-the-board spending increases seen as an intrinsic good. The budget crisis that ensued, and the move to a politics of austerity in 1983, ensured that the Mitterrand government’s initial policy prescriptions would never be fully implemented. If this were the whole story, any number of simple received models might provide an explanation. We could see this as a case of economic (or budgetary) determinism, in which fiscal reality trumped ideological hopes. Alternatively, we could invoke the change of systemic framework, from a Keynesian to a neo-liberal model of economic and budget policy as a sweeping overall explanation.³ Indeed, external constraints such as the internationalization of the economy, the advent of EU controls on national budgets, and the development of neo-liberal ideology might seem to provide a sufficient explanation for the policy evolution observed, if it were considered a-historically. A closer look, however, and a restoration of historical process as a central element of analysis, tells a more complex story.

A close analysis of the actions of senior civil servants who actually directed French social welfare policy in the 20 years following 1980, reveals the endogenous impact of this group and its ideas on the evolution of policy. Far from abandoning state intervention, as the neo-liberal model might suggest, the actors we identified strengthened it. This result is paradoxical, since we observe that the general faith in state intervention inherited from the earlier period of post-war growth was increasingly contested from the mid-1980s onward, a period that brought wholesale privatization of state-owned industry and the gradual introduction of market mechanisms even into a number of public service sectors. (Suleiman, 1995; Massardier, 2003; Muller, 2005; Jobert, 2004) In the social welfare sector, nevertheless, what we observe is a re-legitimization of state action through the close control of social accounts by the state.

² This section represents a condensed version of a paper presented at the 3rd General Conference of the ECPR in September 2005. (Genieys, 2005b)

³ For a discussion of the concept of systemic frameworks and programmatic models in the context of comparative public policy, see Smyrl (2005).

Having observed this, it becomes important to seek the elements that allowed this policy change to evolve from the creation of discrete policy instruments (Lascoumes and Le Gales, 2004) to bring a more sweeping change in policy culminating in a constitutional reform granting parliament the right to oversee social spending, the 1995 Plan Juppé.⁴

The hypothesis we advance will lead us to show how, at the turn of the 1990s, the implementation of rigorous spending controls for social policy allowed the consolidation of authority over this policy sector by a distinct elite group united not only by social and educational background but, much more importantly, by a particular professional trajectory.⁵ This group of senior civil servants became increasingly autonomous relative to the more visible holders of formal authority (ministers and members of parliament) and emerged triumphant from a competition for authority with a rival group of senior civil servants based in the Ministry of Finance. The two following sections address the distinct elements of this hypothesis: we discuss first questions related to the identification of a policy elite, and then turn to evaluating its actions and impact.

Who governs social welfare policy?

At the source of our enquiry into the transformation of social welfare policy lay a much more general question. What role do bureaucratic elites truly play in French political decision-making today?⁶ In the actual configuration of the French Fifth Republic, has the role and power of the various categories of elites changed? How does the analysis of the role of change in public policy allow us to learn more about elites? (Schmidt, 1999) The line of enquiry suggested here articulates the question of change in policy with that of political transformation or, at the very least, the evolution of political personnel. Unlike most enquiry by English-speaking new institutionalist scholars, thus, we sought from the first to employ an explicitly sociological approach – to know not only what was done and under what institutional constraints but also by whom and, if possible, why.

This neo-elitist perspective led us to combine the investigation of policy choices with analysis of the production of consensus around democratic institutional procedures.⁷ In this, we pursued a long-standing aim of the study of elite sociology as, by emphasizing what takes place concretely behind the screen of formal authority (of a President or Prime Minister, for example), it seeks to understand the logics of political action by analyzing all of the actors who participate in the decision-making process. Such a perspective leads

⁴ As will be discussed below, the real winners of the reform were not so much members of parliament but the civil servants who provide them with information and guidance.

⁵ Our emphasis on the role of identifiable actors and the choices they made sets this study apart from those such as Palier (2002) that concentrate on the intermediation by institutional structures of interests and 'objective' requirements but gloss over the question of concrete and identifiable actors. While we share Palier's conclusions concerning the nature and significance of policy change, thus, our explanation of how it came about are quite different.

⁶ The historical role of senior civil servants – *les hauts fonctionnaires* – in making French public policy has been abundantly demonstrated and is not at issue. (Sulleiman, 1976 and 1979; Jobert and Muller, 1987; Thoenig, 1987) The contemporary relevance of this model, however, has been questioned. (Massrdier, 2003)

⁷ For a full discussion of the neo-elitist approach, and a systematic bibliography, see Genieys (2005c).

to a significantly different point of view from that adopted by functionalist or institutionalist analysis. Neo-institutionalist scholars such as Scharpf (1997), by focusing their analysis on actors have shown that the institutional and public policy perspectives can be opposed, if the strategies of actors lead them to this. By centering our own inquiry on the role of actors, specifically a group of senior civil servants faced with a decision-making process in the matter of social policy, we sought to establish the point that a change in policy can also have its effect on the whole of the relevant institutional configuration.

The conclusions of the original study rested on a detailed case study, but were meant as a starting point for generalization. Accordingly, we sought a policy sector representative of the broader institutional crisis that is currently facing the French state. The choice of a spending rather than a revenue producing, policy area was central to our purpose. The new budgetary policies that resulted from the financial constraints of the 1980s led to repeated clashes between the Ministry of Finance and the various “spending” ministries. (Leca, 1996) The social policy sector, and more precisely policies such as health insurance and family support policy were typical of this tension characterized by ongoing budgetary constraints.

The social policy sector was further representative of ‘spending ministries’ in that it was seen by civil servants themselves as an ordinary sector, not one of the “elite” career paths that promised brilliant careers for those fortunate enough to take them. (Suleiman, 1976 and 1979) Recent work on the sociology of ministers’ personal staffs (*cabinets*) (Rouban, 1997; Mathiot and Sawiki, 1999a and b) as well as studies focusing on career strategies of the graduates of the E.N.A. confirm that specialization in this sector was long considered something of a dead end. (Eymeri, 2001) As such, it is an interesting “least likely” case for resistance to the ideologically-inspired budget cutting of the neo-liberal “state economists.” (Jobert, ed., 1994) And yet, resistance there was, as well as active reform. We sought to understand what made it possible.

These considerations led us to analyze change and continuity in policy according to the sociological characteristics of actors. (Mathiot, 2000) The actors in question are those who can be identified as holding a position of power within the sector (members of ministers’ *cabinets*, director or deputy director of an administrative unit), but also those in political interaction with the sector in the process of defining or negotiating policies (top political officials including ministers, the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic). To this end, we first carried out a sociographic study of all political and administrative personnel who held positions at the highest level of the health and social policy units of the French state between 1981 and 1997 – a positional elite by definition. This was followed up with an analysis of the professional trajectory of this elite, which led us to define the characteristics of a more restricted sub-set, those who chose to build their careers within this sector and, in so doing, acquired considerable professional and technical expertise in the area of social policy.

Quantitative analysis of this population according to standard criteria (academic degrees, age of entry into public service and of accession to a senior position ...) conforms at first

glance that this sample shares the broad characteristics traditionally ascribed to French political-administrative elites in general. (Kessler, 1986)⁸ Analysis of the academic background of our sample shows a population marked by high academic achievement.⁹ Passage through the ENA is a classical attribute of senior French civil servants. Frequently the “*énarques*,” as graduates of the ENA are known, give their career a boost by serving in a junior capacity in a ministerial cabinet immediately after leaving the ENA. (Rouban, 1997) In this way, of the 133 individuals in our sample 95, or 71%, were *énarques*. In this dimension, our sample is absolutely representative of the larger universe of French administration: attendance at the ENA is a critical stage in a career path that leads to a senior civil service position. When interviewed, however, members of our sample stressed that the importance of the ENA, lies less in the skills or knowledge taught there than in the contacts that one can acquire there.

The sub-set of *énarques* in our sample was divided roughly equally between individuals who chose to specialize in civil administration (35%) and those who joined one or another of the “*grand corps*” of the French state (Cour des Comptes, 11%; Conseil d’Etat, 8%; Inspection des Finances, 6%; Inspection Générale des Affaires Sociales (IGAS), 14%). The attraction of the social policy sector was not a result of these initial professional choices, however. Rather we found that the members of our sample had a professional profile virtually identical to that of the French senior civil service as a whole. For them like for their colleagues in other policy areas, professional advancement was a matter of success at the ENA followed by co-option by existing elites.

These initial observations drawn from quantitative analysis did not allow us to identify any specific characteristics of our sample relative to the larger population of French senior civil servants. On the other hand, a systematic comparison of the positions successively occupied by certain senior civil servants (*conseiller technique*, director of a ministerial cabinet, director or deputy director of a central administrative service) with the length of individual careers allowed us to identify a sub-set of roughly 40 individuals (35% of the original sample) who chose a professional specialization at the top levels of this field for a period of over three years.

With this observation, however, we reached the limits of purely quantitative analysis. This approach tells us nothing about what may have motivated individuals in the sub-set identified to seek this particular career path. On possibility, was that what we perceived as choice was in fact confirmation that social policy was a professional “dead end.” (Eymeri, 2001) Arguing against this, however, is the fact that the remaining two-thirds of our sample did indeed continue their career in other sectors, both public and private. With this in mind, we put forward the hypothesis that those who remained within the

⁸ One distinctive trait of the social sector since the 1980s is its relative feminization (22% of the overall sample were women)

⁹ Of our sample, 44% held university degrees in law (31% *maitrise* 13% doctorate), while 39% did so in the social sciences (14% *maitrise*, 15% doctorate). Fully 50% were graduates of the *Institut d’Etudes Politiques* of Paris (50%). In contrast, specialized degree programs such as *Ecole Nationale de Santé Publique* (4%) or the various specialized engineering schools (11%) occupy a distinctly marginal position. (Genieys, 1999)

sector did so as a result of a conscious choice. Their longevity, in this perspective, was voluntary, and reflects a long-term career strategy.

Once a target sub-set had been identified, we complemented objective analysis of the career trajectory of administrative elites with the more subjective information gathered in interviews. This allowed us to identify several indicators confirming our initial hypothesis. Self-identification with the social policy sector coincided with passage in certain specific professional positions. Among these are the so-called “social chamber” of the *Cour des Comptes*, and the IGAS.¹⁰ It was largely there, we found, that sectoral identity was solidified both through a “hothouse” atmosphere in which leading young talents were brought together, and through ongoing opportunity for socialization around a shared vision of the role of the state in social welfare policy.

The network of professional contacts made at this time was reinforced by the prevailing practice of co-option that governed recruitment into both ministerial cabinets and the highest levels of central administrations. In addition to the ever-present partisan logic based on party affiliation (which was most significant in the ministerial cabinets), career mobility and advancement was largely based on personal relationships. The most senior policy makers oversaw and directed the careers of more recent arrivals. Phrases such as “I knew him”, “I spotted him”, “I followed him”, etc. were all-pervasive in interviews. (Genyies, 1999) Indeed, interview subjects did not hesitate to give the names of those who had favored their integration into the sector and their career advancement. It is around this culture of aggregation that newcomers internalized a logic of collective action set by those who have gone before.

This observation, we must stress, is not tantamount to a claim that we have identified a self-replicating “nobility” at the summit of the state. (Bourdieu, 1989) Rather, what we observe is the construction of an elite through direct interaction during the decision-making process for social welfare policy. Our analysis of career trajectories rests on the identification of a limited group of elites characterized by the accumulation of resources (both administrative and political experience, for example as well as relational and reputational resources), a significant tenure within the sector (more than three years), and the successive occupation of a number of responsible positions, whether institutional (director of administrative units or of public insurance funds) or political (technical or personal staff of a minister).

¹⁰ Established under the *ancien regime* and strengthened by every government since the Revolution, the *Cour des Comptes* serves both as the final auditor of all activities employing public funds and as an administrative tribunal responsible for ensuring the proper use of public funds. In this second role, the members of its specialized “chambers” are closely involved not only in the detailed oversight but also in the formulation of public policy. A feature of the *Cour des Comptes* common to all of the “Grand Corps” of French administration is that its members typically spend part of their career in other administrative positions, all the while retaining their identification with the body.

Created in 1967, the *Inspection Générale aux Affaires Sociales* (IGAS) shares some of the audit functions of the *Cour des Comptes*, but is primarily entrusted with more general evaluation of social welfare policy. In this role, it is called on to produce annual reports on specific topics set by the government of the day.

Taking into account the period of entry into the sector allowed us to distinguish the principal episodes of institutionalization. Three “generations” of elite actors were evident at the time of this analysis. A first distinct group was made up of senior civil servants, many of them politically or philosophically close to Christian Democracy, who achieved senior positions prior to the elections of 1981. Drawing strength from their professional longevity, these officials wielded the moral, as well as the institutional, authority of. Holding strategic positions, particularly in the Cour des Comptes, and regularly reinforced by successive shifts in political power after 1981, the individuals of this generation made themselves the guardians of the state’s role in the health care system. It was their choices more than any other, as we shall see, that proved significant.

The second type of career is represented by those who entered the sector immediately following the election victory of the socialist François Mitterrand in 1981. Coming in many cases from the technical advisors of the Socialist Party, these young civil servants embodied political change. Their trajectory within the sector was marked essentially by the fact that they were the first to confront the budgetary “rationalization” of social policy that followed the advent of economic retrenchment after 1983. (Dreyfus, 1985). A final career type is that of the “social managers” who reached senior positions after the political shift of 1986, which brought in a conservative Prime Minister. It is at this time that the first policies inspired by “neo-liberal” ideas appeared in France.

These successive generations have in common a shared fund of professional knowledge passed on by the “elders” through professional seminars or high-level internships. “Apprenticeship” periods spent at junior levels of the Cour des Comptes or the IGAS, or the passages by some individuals in the Budget Unit of the Ministry of Finance allowed them to build a shared vision of the choices for sectoral policy. Finally, the interpersonal relations built up in ministerial cabinets or the various sub-directions of central administrations, where small-group work around particular themes is the general rule, favor a particular kind of know-how when dealing with policy problems.

This generational link, more or less openly alluded to in interviews, is evident in the shared desire to overcome budgetary constraints imposed by the Ministry of Finance on social welfare policy. Notable in this context, is the role of a leading figure among the “elders” generation, Jean Choussant (ENA / Inspecteur des Finances) who, as director of hospitals and then director of the budget, was a leader in transforming the vision of social policy. Under his influence, the senior civil service as a whole gradually rallied around the notion that it was imperative for any new social welfare policy to be constructed so as to preserve a central role for the state, even while also taking into account the new financial constraints. Finally, the analytic division of our sample into three “generations” allows us to underscore the progressive consolidation of power in the hands of a new sectoral elite. The career trajectories illustrated here were only marginally affected by major shifts in political power. Quite to the contrary, this elite group prepared itself to face an uncertain future by preparing policy alternatives that, while carrying out necessary reforms, ensured that the oversight role of the state in this area would be reinforced.

From budgetary crisis to programmatic reform

Having identified a structured group of policy-makers whose position allowed direct access to political power and whose internal cohesion allowed this access to be used to a consistent purpose is only a beginning. Three further facts must be established if our hypothesis of the existence and significance of a “programmatic elite” is to have even the presumption of validity. In the first place, it is necessary to show that significant reform was in fact carried out. This done, we must demonstrate that the elite group identified had the means to bring it about, and that the results obtained matched the previously determined and stated policy preferences of the actors in question.

Seen retrospectively, the accumulated result of 15 years of reform in social welfare policy is impressive. Limiting ourselves strictly to the health sector, examples include the physician-led capping of health-related expenses (*maîtrise médicalisée des dépenses de santé*), or the transformation of universal health insurance into universal health coverage. A final example is provided by the global reform of the hospital budget (PMSI – *programme de médicalisation des systèmes d'information*), which was known as the ‘*Plan Bérégovoy*’ when announced in 1983 but was subsequently implemented by several succeeding governments. This last policy, the PMSI, which amounted to the imposition by the state of a single overall framework for the budget of public hospitals, was not a financial measure only. It was accompanied by the establishment of a system of evaluation for hospitals. We are not looking, in this case, at a simple importation of ‘economic’ logic into the health sector. Rather, the reform explicitly took account of the specificity of the medical sphere. The same phenomenon is evident with respect to the physician-led capping of health-related expenses, alluded to above.. The strategy pursued in this case led to the creation of policy tools that allowed the health budget to be controlled by means other than heavy-handed accounting limitations. Rather, physicians themselves were given responsibility for this by encouraging the notion of the “best use of care.” In all of these policies, the unique nature of health care and its professional practitioners was put forward.¹¹ This emphasis on the sectoral specificity made it possible for the budgetary constraints imposed by the Ministry of Finance to be accepted.

This last remark points to a critical finding of this study. The ‘social policy elite,’ as identified in the previous section, was facing not just an objective challenge but a “political” one – in the sense of a struggle for authority over a sector – whose source lay essentially in the Ministry of Finance. The role of the “state economists” as proponents not only of budgetary rigor but of ‘neo-liberal’ ideology in general is a much-studied feature of French, and indeed of European, government in the 1980s and 1990s. (Jobert, ed., 1994) It is to the influence of this group that is generally attributed the move away from direct state micro-management of the economy, a policy represented most visibly by the privatization of state-owned enterprise. In the context of the present study,

¹¹ It is important to underscore that while the role of the medical profession was put forward in these reforms, it does not follow that the reforms were the product of the influence of the medical profession itself – or indeed were even actively sought by it at all.

however, the “state economists” or the “people from Bercy” (seat of the Ministry of Finance) appear not so much as bearers of an ideology as competitors for sectoral authority. It is in the context of this competition for authority that both the ideas and the strategies of the ‘social welfare policy elite’ must be situated.

The ‘social welfare elite’ pursued throughout the period studied a collective strategy of differentiation within the larger apparatus of the state and vis-à-vis other elite groups. In particular, we observe a strong desire to establish an identity with respect to the Ministry of Finance. While this is most pertinent for sub-fields such as health insurance and old-age pensions, this tendency can be found throughout the sector.¹² Differentiation vis-à-vis the ‘state economists,’ however, did not mean ignoring economics. The abject failure of uncontrolled spending in the early 1980s, presumably, had not been forgotten. Central to the strategy of sectoral autonomy, thus, was a conscious borrowing of method. An effort can be noted on the part of the ‘welfare policy elite’ to internalize the problem of financial constraints, rather than allowing these to be imposed externally by the Ministry of Finance. There is no doubt that, as part of this process, certain ideas and procedures typical of the Ministry of Finance made their way into the social welfare sector.

We can find traces of this strategy in the career paths chosen by second and third generation members of the ‘social welfare elite.’ In a number of cases, the vector for the transmission of budgetary procedures was the passage of civil servants who would eventually make their mark in the social welfare sector through the Sixth Directorate of the Ministry of Finance (social policy budget). The management of the *Sécurité Sociale*, France’s national health insurance program provides an example of this process. We observe the gradual replacement at the head of the program’s Directorate of senior civil servants whose principal organizing vision was one of social progress by others who tended to privilege a more financial approach. As evoked in one interview, the makers of social welfare policy came to think of themselves as a quasi-ministry of “Social Budget.”¹³ Nevertheless, the trade-offs among ministries and their preferences made by the Prime Minister gave rise to institutional confrontations with representatives of the Ministry of Finance. For all of its new budgetary rigor, social affairs is still a spending program; the conflict with the Ministry of Finance was more or less structural.¹⁴ This in turn contributes to consolidating the collective identity of the social welfare sector, providing incentive to behave as a unitary actor in the ongoing game. This is incentive was all the stronger, of course, as evidence of success accumulated. In the words of one senior civil servant,

¹² The article authored in the journal *Pouvoirs* by François Mercereau, former director of the *Sécurité Sociale* and member the personal staff of Pierre Bérégovoy, interviewed for this study, is a model of the genre. This senior civil servant in the social policy sector puts forward a financial and forward-looking interpretation of the future of national health insurance and retirement funds that provide a perfect illustration of the attitude described more generally in this paper. (Mercereau, 2000)

¹³ For Anne-Marie Brocas, who was deputy director of the *Sécurité Sociale* during this period, the institutional autonomy of the social affairs sector was undeniable, but it may well have come at the price of internalizing to a certain extent not just the methods but the norms of the Ministry of Finance. (Brocas, 2001: 66)

¹⁴ The very structure of the Ministry of Finance reflects this. Its “sectoral bureaus” are in constant and direct contact with their opposite numbers in the “spending ministries.”

I note that in inter-ministerial discussions, we now negotiate as equals with the people from the Ministry of Finance. It's true that we are called on to implement objectives that they recognize and understand, but their expertise is no greater than ours. I think as far as know-how, we are now recognized as being superior. The Ministry of Finance merely plays the role of counter-weight. It is not a tutor for us as I had once feared it might become. (Genyies, 1999b, p. 83)

This perpetuation of roles facilitates the process of homogenization of a sectoral elite, which must not only give evidence of internal coherence but show that it can do better than its competitors in their own terms. In this context, the affirmation of the centrality of the role of the state in social welfare policy was a shared strategy.

The second criterion attesting to the homogeneity of the elite is the continuity in its cognitive representation of public action. Whether we look at published texts or interviews, it is possible to identify the elements of a vision for the transformation of the French system of social protection, a vision shared by former members of ministerial cabinets in governments of the right as well as the left.¹⁵ Objectively, the members of this elite are rivals for the top positions, a dynamic reinforced by the political instability of the 1990s. Despite this, they do not hesitate to take up the same shared ideas and methods. This explains what otherwise would be a paradox. While professional mobility within the sector is high, with shifts in political majorities leading to changes in personnel at the highest levels of the civil service, policy continuity is very great. Everything happens as if in a game of musical chairs in which the individual actors change but the tune stays the same.

The relative political autonomy of the social welfare policy elite, accordingly, was made possible, despite the high degree of internal mobility of at the highest levels, by the imposition of a shared set of policy ideas. In effect, the members of this elite share a common programmatic model for action, which can be summarized as follows:¹⁶

- In order to preserve the French system of social protection, it must be adapted to meet current financial constraints. This, in turn can be accomplished only by reinforcing the directive role of the state and targeting benefits to the most disadvantaged sectors of society.

The senior civil servants interviewed for this study all proved to be sincerely attached to the founding principles of the French social security system. To preserve this, however, they were willing to embrace significant reform. Most obviously, they put forward a disciplined budgetary approach to social welfare policy. More far-reaching, was their systematic emphasis on the state's central responsibilities in the social welfare area,

¹⁵ Among published texts, examples include Johanet (1998), Mereceau (2000), and de Kervasdoué and Pellet (2002).

¹⁶ Our sense of the term "programmatic framework" in this particular case is very close to the notion of the *référentiel* that lies at the heart of the approach of French scholars to the cognitive dimension of public policy. See Faure, Pollet and Varin, eds. (1995).

which translated to a critique of the corporatist model that was at the heart of the traditional French approach to social insurance. This critique was not marginal or incidental; quite to the contrary, affirmation of the role of the central administration with respect to the various Social Security funds was a recurring leitmotif in texts as well as in our interviews. While not fundamentally new, it has taken on increasing importance since 1981 (Palier, 2002).

We can see this clearly in the content of the Plan Juppé, which was largely a product of ideas originating Social Security Directorate whose importance was on the increase just at that time.¹⁷ The 1995 ‘Plan Juppé’ drew heavily from the work of the study *Santé 2010* carried out by the Planning Commission led by Raymond Soubie in the early 1990s. The ideas developed in this framework were taken up by the senior directors of the *Sécurité Sociale* in their negotiations with the staffs of the Prime Minister and the Minister for Social Affairs. Two groups that, in turn, played an essential role in the closed elite decision-making process that we have described. Similarly the 1983 ‘Plan Bérégovoy’ and the 1991 ‘Réforme Evin’ concerning public hospitals were both elaborated by personal staff of the minister of the time in conjunction with the senior administrators of the Hospital Directorate. Reforms of family support policy announced in 1986 and 1994, to cite one final example, were largely decided at the level ministerial staffs in close coordination with the CNAF – the national family assistance fund. In this way the actors we have identified acted as, and should be considered as, members of a single unified programmatic elite.

The shift from a logic of equality to a logic of fairness is also evident throughout these reforms. In this perspective, it is seen as necessary to target social transfer payments towards populations who need them most.¹⁸ This philosophy can be found at the base of the gradual evolution of family policy, with its move to a partly need-based scheme, as well as in the notion of universal medical coverage without respect to sector or employment history. Together, these elements constitute a stock or repertoire of possible solutions available over a fairly long term. The actors we studied were able to draw on this common stock of ideas and identity in order to wield influence in the decision-making process.

Part Two : Beyond the Autonomous State – Elite Competition for Authority

The empirical findings summarized above call into question a number of received ideas concerning policy-making in general and the evolution of the French state in particular. Two closely-linked elements seem particularly important. The first is the opportunity to get once and for all beyond the rather simplistic notion of the “strong” or “autonomous”

¹⁷ A former director of the *Sécurité Sociale*, interviewed for this project, affirmed that most of the “ideas” that made their way into the *Plan Juppé* had their origins in his services. Despite inevitable “paternity conflicts” concerning the origin of ideas, the general pattern that emerged from our interviews strongly suggest the presence of a genuine commonality of views concerning the desirable future of the sector.

¹⁸ A similar logic is evident as well in the evolution of income support policies, with the introduction of the needs-tested *Revenu Minimum d’Insertion* (RMI). (Palier, 2002)

state seen as a unitary actor in opposition to an undifferentiated “society” or even to “interests.” From this follows a reassessment of the role and motivations of those groups commonly labeled “elite.” Breaking with the notions either of a unified “power elite” or of an interest-based pluralism, we propose as a hypothesis for further research the existence of closely integrated but temporally ephemeral groupings of elite actors around concrete policy programs. These “programmatically elites,” we conclude serve as endogenous motors of medium-term change within institutional frameworks that evolve only much more slowly. The remainder of this essay seeks to put this assertion into context, and consider its use in the production of further testable hypotheses.

Distinguishing institutional structures from elite actors

One possible answer to the finding that successive reforms of French social welfare had the cumulative effect of strengthening and re-legitimizing state oversight of the sector would have been to consider it as trivial. “Everyone knows,” after all, that France provides the textbook example of the “strong state” with considerable autonomy from the society it governs. This received wisdom, however, proves to be of dubious analytical value. The type of reasoning associated with the work of Eric Nordlinger (1981), in particular, in which state agents work to either to overcome societal interests or to bring these into accord with the state’s own preferences does not fit well with what we observe. There are two reasons of unequal importance for this, and while one is an artifact of the specific object chosen for this study, the second has much more general implications.

There is no doubt that, by choosing to focus on policy elaboration rather than implementation, we excluded any significant study of non-state actors. Neither “society” as a whole, the representatives of either the users or the professional providers of social services, nor the “social partners:” labor unions and the representatives of employers were present in any significant way in the policy-making process. As an observation on the French policy-making model, this is significant but not new; it reinforces the generally-acknowledged view of the French state as largely isolated from societal interests. By itself, it might be seen as evidence in favor of a fairly simple “autonomous state” model. This solution, however, is precluded by two additional factors.

Were we to extend the scope of this study to include implementation in addition to formulation of policy, we would find that the French state is often not as strong as it initially appears, and that the interests that were shut out of policy-making have ways of making their influence felt when it comes to implementation. (Massardier, 2003) As discussed above, however, this influence is almost exclusively negative. Interest groups or large-scale public mobilization can delay reform, dilute it, or even bring it to a halt altogether. In our observation, it plays very little positive role, in the sense of inserting new ideas into the debate. Emphasizing the limits and weaknesses of state authority, thus, does not invalidate the central hypothesis of paper, which is that of the unique role of the programmatic elite in generating ideas and translating these into concrete policy.

Our principal critique of the “autonomous state” thesis, however lies elsewhere, precisely in the framing of the question as a false dichotomy between “state” and “society.” It is within the state, we find, that the conflicts and compromises out of which policy change arises take place. An “interest-based” approach to politics, moreover, explains very little about this conflict or its outcome. French civil servants, much as their Swedish and British counterparts studied three decades ago by Hugh Hecllo (1974) “puzzled” their way through the problem of adapting social policies to the budgetary realities of the 1980s and 1990s. To see them simply as impartial “problem-solvers,” however, misses the essence of our findings. Interests were indeed at stake in the struggle between the “social welfare policy elite” and the “state economists,” but these interests were intellectual and professional rather than material. What each sought was legitimate authority over a public policy sector. The means of attaining that authority were the production and imposition of a coherent and cohesive policy program. It is to this interaction of policy program and legitimate authority that we turn in the final section of this essay.

From sectoral elites to programmatic elites

The “neo-elitist” starting point of our original empirical study, as noted above, was originally premised on the assumption that an “elite” if one could be found, would be unitary. What was actually observed was quite different. From a sociological standpoint, the senior decision-makers of the French state (and, indeed, of much of French private industry) can indeed be said to belong to a homogenous sociological “class,” sharing an upper middle-class socio-economic background and a common educational curriculum in which the weight of the ENA remains very great. Precisely because of its near-universal coverage, however, the explanatory power of this sociological identity with respect to policy debates and policy change proved to be virtually nil.

Much more important, we realized, were the career trajectories created through individual choices of senior civil servants, choices that led a small group of them to specialize in the conception and governance of social welfare policy. Identifying a sectoral elite of this kind, while interesting in its own right, does not by itself explain how policy change takes place. The key additional factor, uncovered through systematic interviews and textual analysis, was the generation by this elite group at a particular moment in time of a coherent policy program. It is this cohesion of a group of elites whose positions allow them to take action around a coherent program of action that defines what we label a **programmatic elite**. Two necessary conditions, we emphasize define such a group; neither by itself is sufficient.

In the first place the potential programmatic elite must already hold or have ready access to the institutional levers of decision-making in the policy area in question.¹⁹ The best

¹⁹ This feature, above all, distinguishes the programmatic elite from Sabatier’s “advocacy coalition.” (Sabatier, 1988; Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1993) At least in the case studied here, the programmatic elite is also a much narrower and more closely integrated group than would be the case of an advocacy coalition encompassing a complete policy sub-system. Actors such as organized and outside experts, central to the advocacy coalition approach, have very little place here.

ideas in the world – as academic researchers are only too well placed to know – will have little impact on policy if institutional power is not available to back them. The ‘social welfare policy elite,’ made up as it was of the sector’s senior civil servants, undoubtedly met this condition.

By itself, however, position is not enough. The new elite of the 1980s and 1990s was distinguished from their 1970s predecessor (who held, by definition, the same positions) by their cohesion around a concrete set of programmatic ideas. We have seen how the multiple linkages provided by interconnecting career paths made the production, consolidation, and propagation of this model possible. We cannot stress highly enough, however, the contingent nature of the events we observed. The policy program around which the social welfare policy elite coalesced was the work of identifiable individuals at a particular moment in time. Its influence was felt strongly for a period of two decades and has arguably declined since.

This influence, at its height, was wielded through both direct and indirect means. Directly, a number of the individuals making up the programmatic elite for social welfare policy were in a position to make far-reaching administrative decisions. More important, perhaps, was their indirect power as privileged providers of policy alternatives to elected officials and cabinet ministers. Textual analysis clearly supports the claims made in interviews that the ideas discussed among policy professionals made their way directly into the texts and ultimately the laws published under the names of successive ministers, most importantly into the 1995 *Plan Juppé*. A near-monopoly on the supply of authoritative information, when used in support of a cohesive policy program, produced visible results; twenty years of incremental change has left the French social policy system profoundly transformed. (Pallier, 2005)

When constituted along these lines, a programmatic elite functions, for the span of its existence, as a genuine collective actor. In the typology of collective actors proposed by Fritz Scharpf (1997) such an elite is a “movement,” in which individual power resources are placed at the service of a common goal. Resources and common purpose, thus are necessary conditions, along with mechanisms of coordination allowing the former to be mobilized in pursuit of the latter. Together, resources, purpose, and coordination comprise the sufficient defining conditions of a programmatic elite.

Having ruled out material interests as a basis for policy choices, we are left with a final question – that of motives and purpose. Why did senior civil servants, without direct ties to the interests at stake and whose personal careers could have carried on just as well in the absence of reform, work so hard to bring about reform? Our provisional answer to this question is that elite individuals and groups seek, above all, the particular form of power best described as legitimate authority – the ability to issue directives that will be obeyed willingly.

The confrontation detailed above between competing elite groups, social welfare on the one hand and finance on the other, reinforces this hypothesis. The stakes in the game, as related in numerous interviews, were being “taken seriously” by, or negotiating “as

equals” with the officials of the ministry of finance. (Genieys, 1999) In pursuit of this re-legitimation of their authority over social policy – seriously undermined by the budgetary crises of the early 1980s – the ‘social welfare elite’ was willing and able to adapt key elements of their program to the new budgetary realities. By this act of adaptation, the programmatic elite for social welfare succeeded both in protecting the programmatic core of their vision of a state-led social welfare system, and in re-imposing their own authority over that system.

The resulting reforms, harnessing as they did the tools of budgetary discipline in the interest of reinvigorated state direction of social welfare policy (*i.e.*, a strengthening of the statist, as opposed to corporatist elements of the system) could be seen as a “strengthening of the state.” This study shows the limits of such analysis. What we really see is the strengthening of a particular programmatic elite *within* the state at the expense of competing elite groups, also within the state.

Conclusion : From Hypothesis Generation to Hypothesis Testing

The findings of this study, we have seen, call into question – or at least suggest the limits – of a number of received models of policy making. Our ambition, of course, is to move beyond critique and propose a positive model better adapted to the realities of contemporary policy making. Such a model, obviously, cannot be confined in scope to one sector in a single country. Nor, however, can it become so general as to become effectively unfalsifiable. The mid-range theory for which we strive is intended to apply to contemporary policy-making in Europe and North America.

Within these limits, we believe the role of programmatic elites as engines of policy change is not limited to France. A preliminary test of this hypothesis is now underway, as our study of health policy is being broadened to include Germany, Spain and the UK. The configuration of elite groups in these countries does not, of course, map precisely on what was found in France. Functional equivalents, however, can be found. Initial results in the UK, subject to verification, seem to suggest that the role of generating and promoting programmatic ideas, played in France by senior civil servants, is played in Britain by a more loosely-structured group individuals based in academics and the private sector, but who are called to act as advisors for political leaders.²⁰ While lacking the linear career paths of the senior civil servants who made up the French programmatic elite for social welfare, this group would seem to possess the key attributes that we have

²⁰ Institutional loci for programmatic production and consolidation, as suggested in initial UK interviews, include the Strategy Unit of the Department of Health, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s Council of Economic Advisors. Both are characterized by the strong presence of experts seconded from academics and the private sector, and by the direct access to cabinet-level decision-makers. A provisional conclusion from the British data that supports what we found in France is the purely negative role played by professional associations such as the BMA, parties (including Labour) and unions. These can resist or impede policy change, but do not participate in its elaboration. Once again, the programmatic elite approach seems better adapted than the more general advocacy coalition framework – and to speak in terms of ‘state autonomy’ is simply asking the wrong question.

identified: direct access to the levers of power and the self-conscious identification with a coherent set of programmatic ideas.

The hypothesis of the programmatic elite, to conclude, is a challenge both to interest-group pluralism and to unitary models of the “autonomous state.” If we are right, the “strength” or “autonomy” of the state as a whole matters much less than the relative authority of distinct elite groups within the state. It is entirely possible that outcomes in one policy sector will be different from those in another – just as we noted in France the coincidence in time of a re-legitimation of state action is social welfare and state disengagement in industrial policy. The role of interests, in this view, will be much more relevant in the implementation than in the formulation stage of policy. Unions, professional associations, or citizens in general, retain the ability to impede or reject reform, but very little influence on its positive content.

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