

# **NEW INSTITUTIONALISM AND FRENCH PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS: MAINTAINING THE *EXCEPTION CULTURELLE*?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The concept of new institutionalism has been very fashionable since the mid-1980s. This has been true in continental Europe as elsewhere. However, some authors criticise this trend arguing that many of the results of new institutionalist studies merely re-discover political aspects already revealed by continental European political scientists. By focusing on the case of contemporary French analysis of public policies I suggest that this division is unclear. I assume that, to a large extent, these theories confront the same theoretical challenges independently of their national context and that they tend to deal with them in a comparable way. In so doing, I advocate the introduction of new institutionalist works as a means to establish a consistent transatlantic theoretical framework and re-connect the policy science *à la française* to the international mainstream.

## **INTRODUCTION**

While it is indubitable that new institutionalism has become a strong international movement of thought in the field of political sociology (Powell, Di Maggio 1991, pp. 1-38), it has developed amidst significant criticism in some European countries such as France, Germany and Italy. According to many authors (Immergut 1998, pp. 5-34; Smith 1999, pp. 111-131; Thoenig 2002, pp. 127-137), continental European political scientists in general and French political scientists in particular, find it difficult to

perceive innovations introduced by American and Scandinavian new institutionalists because, for the former, the idea that institutions may have an impact on society has been accepted as 'common sense' for some time, a factor which may be attributed to the centrality of the State in these societies. A rapid survey of the situation demonstrates that the reception of new institutionalism in France was largely mediated by autochthonous approaches. For instance, although E. Négrier and B. Jouve (1988) turned their attention to the works of B. Marin (1990) on political exchange, in order to elaborate the notion of territorialized political exchange, they explicitly recognised the inheritance of M. Crozier et E. Friedberg (1980); O. Nay (1997) also accepted the new institutionalist contribution but showed a strong affinity with the political sociology of J. Lagroye (1991); A. Smith (1995), influenced by the works of B. Jobert, P. Muller (1987) and M. Abélès (1990) wrote that he was in favour of a moderate use of new institutionalist notions; lastly, O. Borraz (1999, pp. 77-110), elaborated an original syncretism between strategic and new institutionalist theories by progressively integrating representations in his approach.

Thus, this article has a very functional aim. In fact, as with many young French-speaking political scientists, I myself have also been confronted with the problem of the similarity between new institutionalism and several French sociological approaches, in particular in the field of public policy analysis. Therefore, in order to provide some clarification on this issue, I have decided to clearly raise the problem of the resemblance between these two theoretical *corpi* by comparing them and looking for the causes of their opposition. I assume that, to a large extent, these theories confront the same theoretical challenges and that they tend to deal with them in a comparable way; however, their national contexts introduce elements of cultural misunderstanding. In so doing, I suggest that the introduction of new institutionalist works might provide an

opportunity to establish a consistent transatlantic theoretical framework and re-connect the policy science *à la française* to the international mainstream. In order to give as full as possible a picture of the relationship between these two approaches, I focus consecutively on the social conditions of production and on a theoretical comparison to identify the reasons of this opposition.

**THE SOCIAL CONDITIONS OF THE EMERGENCE  
OF NEW INSTITUTIONALISM  
AND FRENCH PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS**

My starting point is the presentation of the units of comparison. Created in the 1940s, new institutionalist works developed in many directions before being recognised as a consistent *corpus* in the 1980s. French public policy analysis developed in the late 1960s around two main scientific poles, the *Centre de Sociologie des Organisations* (CSO) and the *Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches sur l'Aménagement du Territoire* (CERAT). From 1983 onwards, the creation of the *Groupe d'Analyse des Politiques Publiques* (GAPP) broke this duopoly established on public policies analysis (Fontaine 1996, pp. 481-498).

**The new institutionalism: unity in spite of diversity**

Invoking new institutionalism also implies a discussion of the 'old' one. 'Old' institutionalism labels the works which consider institutional structures as taken for granted from a rational-positivist point of view. This current is well illustrated by the studies of W. Wilson (1887, pp. 197-222) on the hierarchical system of implementation of central political decisions; by the analysis of M. Weber (1922) on the rationalisation

of the state leading to the bureaucratisation; and by the concept of rational organisation of industrial production elaborated by H. Fayol (1916).

These influential works had a different impact in Europe and North America. While European scholars continued to focus on institutions, and particularly on public institutions, the majority of American political scientists opted for an alternative way of analysing politics, based on the rational choice model, behaviourism and functionalism. Their 'rediscovery' of institutions only occurred in the late 1970s. Drawing on the works of P. Selznick (1949), J.G. March and J.P. Olsen (1984, pp. 734-749) baptised the new institutionalism in 1984 and launched an extended American-Scandinavian research programme in 1988. However, new institutionalism remains divided into various currents. In their seminal article, P. Hall and R. Taylor (1996, pp. 469-496) appeared to have established a satisfactory tripartite division of the different new institutionalist tendencies. As early as 1999, B. Guy Peters (1999, pp. 1-38) increased the number to six, and K. Thelen (1999, pp. 369-404) reduced it to two.

According to P. Hall and R. Taylor, new institutionalism consists of three tendencies. The first is the so-called rational-choice tendency, well illustrated by the works of G. Marks (1992, pp. 191-224). For, the rational choice new institutionalism, individuals follow the classical rationality model. However, individuals have to deal with the structures of institutions, generally embodied by the rules imposed by the state. This strand developed through the study of the different voting strategies adopted by the members of the US Congress. The second type is historical institutionalism (Steinmo, Thelen, Longstreth 1992, pp. 2-24; Pierson 1996, pp. 123-63), whose 'calculus approach' establishes the '*path dependence*' mechanism as a principle. This means that the orientation of a policy is conditioned by the previous decisions of actors and institutions. The question of change is resolved by the notion of '*critical junctures*'

which explains changes of course in spite of institutional inertia. The third type is sociological new institutionalism, which has its origins in the organisational sociology of J.G. March and J.P. Olsen. As the 'cultural approach' of historical new institutionalism, sociological new institutionalism stresses the interactive links between institutions and actors. In the wake of the cognitive turn (Berger, Luckmann 1966), the notions of social learning and socialisation explain how structure shapes individual behaviours. From the phenomenology and the ethnomethodology, new institutionalism borrows the concept of a world in which relations between individuals are limited by an absence of universal meaning. However, inter-subjectivity is possible thanks to the reified categories used by common sense within the institution.

It is somewhat artificial to talk about new institutionalism, given its heterogeneous characteristics. In spite of these important differences, these three types of new institutionalism share the same independent variables: ideas, interests and institutions which constitute what E.H. Immergut calls its '*theoretical core*' (1998, pp. 2-34).

### **The strategic analysis of the CSO:**

In France, the importance of the organisational sociology of M. Crozier during the 1960s and 1970s meant that the CSO provided the centre of reference for social science research as regards administrative analysis. It also provided the principal opposition to neo-structuralist and neo-Marxist approaches.

Created in 1961 in Paris, the CSO was not limited to the work of M. Crozier. It brought together several international researchers who agreed upon the interpretative framework of the school, grounded on the bounded rationality of actors. The extent of their analysis increased progressively from case studies related to specific bureaucratic organisations (Crozier 1964) and the local politico-administrative system (Worms 1966,

pp. 249-275; Crozier, Thoenig 1975, pp. 3-32; Grémion, 1976) to the theory of action (Crozier, Friedberg 1977). The echo of the CSO quickly transcended the boundaries of the scientific community to reach the ruling authorities of the state. The themes of the '*clamped society*', that can not be changed '*by decree*' and the '*modest state, modern state*' proceed from the books of M. Crozier (1970, 1979, 1987).

On his return from the Centre for Advanced Study in the Behavioural Sciences of the University of Stanford where he was working as a fellow during the years 1959-1960 (Crozier 1996, pp. 80-95) M. Crozier developed a consistent analytical framework focused on organisations. Four points are particularly emphasised. The first is related to collective action. Organisations are considered as social artefacts reducible to '*concrete action systems*' which can be defined as provisional local orders, the results of temporary rules. The second point is connected to the games of actors, constituted by the interactions between individuals. Thirdly, uncertainty determines these games. Actors are not omniscient and have to take into account the institutional constraints on their strategies to maximise their position. Everyone rely on their own individual resources, knowledge and *savoir-faire*, to make the best possible use of the situations which occur. Lastly, power can take different forms: rules, information, techniques... and fluctuates according to the situation. In this sense, an actor situated at the bottom of the hierarchical scale can control the high-ranking actors of the organisation if this actor positions personally as an intermediary. In order to do this, this actor has to take advantage of the '*zones of uncertainty*' in the system. This type of influence is called '*marginal secant power*'.

### **The cognitive analysis of the CERAT:**

As a response to the strategic analysis of the CSO, a competitive research centre emerged in Grenoble in the 1970s thanks to the efforts of a group of researchers united around the figure of Professor L. Nizard (1974).

The main purpose of CERAT is the study of the constitution and transformation of state public policies. The investigations undertaken within there focused first on case studies such as agricultural policies (Muller 1980), Aerospatiale's policy (Muller 1989) and progressively generalised to the whole field of public policies (Jobert, Muller 1994) and the theory of policy analysis (Muller, Surel 1998).

The cognitive analysis of public policies generated by these researchers is formed of two principal dimensions: on the one hand the articulation of public policies with societal values through the notion of '*référentiels*', on the other hand the internal dynamics of policies analysed through the concept of '*mediation*' (Pollet 1995, pp. 25-47). The *référentiels* are driving representations of reality, sets of values, norms, algorithms and images. They link the different sectoral policies engaged by the state and connect them to the whole society. In the perspective of M. Foucault's '*episteme*' (1975), the *référentiels* combine two aspects generally considered to oppose one another by integrating the notions of social representation and political power at once. This concept permits a demonstration of how a global representation of the world can fit with the sectoral interpretation of a public policy by justifying public actions within a policy field. Thus, public policies are not only a technocratic tool of economic regulation but also an instrument of legitimisation of the established social order. By focusing on the state-society relations through an initial neo-corporatist framework, B. Jobert and P. Muller also concentrate on the agency of actors. These former do not refute the toolbox produced by the CSO to analyse the interactions of actors, but instead advocate the reincorporation of ideas into these relations. The debates between actors regarding the

definition of the global-sectoral mediation, viz. the struggles for the monopoly of the power of legitimate definition of reality are central. Drawing on the theory of hegemony elaborated by A. Gramsci (Femia 1981), the '*mediators*' are actors engaged in a public policy and who act as '*organic intellectuals*' in order to define the sense of the action of public authorities.

### **The systemic analysis of the GAPP:**

From the mid-1980s, French public policy analysis underwent some substantial changes with the creation of the GAPP, a research centre founded by J.-C. Thoenig, an ex-CSO researcher.

The pluralistic approach led GAPP researchers to focus their attention simultaneously on modes of governance and representations. J.-C. Thoenig highlighted the evolution of administrative behaviours (1996, pp. 219-244) and public policy theory (1985, pp. 1-60; with Y. Mény 1990) by virtue of his commitment to the field of the analysis of decentralisation policies (1992, pp. 5-16). P. Duran exerted a strong influence by diversifying the viewpoints of the GAPP, focusing on sectoral issues (1993, pp. 5-32), European public policies (1998, pp. 114-139) and public policy analysis (1999). The major contribution of the GAPP in the field of public policy analysis is to have developed the theoretical perspective opened by systemic analysis in a way quite different to that of the CSO. According to the systemic analysis of GAPP researchers, concrete action systems are not limited to a set of a-socialised actors and they rather should be interpreted as functional, political and cognitive interactions. Despite the fact that governance remains a central aspect of public policies, representations also play a role in the definition of analysed objects. GAPP researchers



reintegrate the analysis of structure, ideas and agency within the same *corpus* by emphasising the processes of institutionalisation of collective action.

## **THE RELATIVE ECHO OF NEW INSTITUTIONALISM IN THE FRENCH PUBLIC POLICY ANALYSIS**

Evaluating the impact of new institutionalist theories on the French policy analysis is a difficult task. It implies addressing the diversity of new institutionalist approaches and the variety of French policy analysis. The necessary approach is twofold and comprises of: first, identifying the position of French policy analysis with regard to the new institutionalist works; second, understanding how the development of new institutionalist perspectives in France is mediated by autochthonous assumptions. In order to proceed, I will discuss the key debates corresponding to the three variables of new institutionalism and the central question of change.

### **Institutions as substantial and functional entities**

The substance and function of institutions remain the centre issues of debate. Are they the sum of individual preferences or do institutions transcend them? While rational choice theorists define institutions as dependent variables the sociological and cultural historical approaches counter that they are independent variables. Whilst the former consider institutions incapable of self volition, or limit this to a metaphoric sense, the latter view institutions as autonomous social beings.

CSO theorists go against the general tide of French policy analysis and new institutionalism by negating the particularity of institutions. This approach focuses more on organisations than on institutions *per se*, since organisations are supposed to have a

more functional aim. According to this school, institutions are built on local-interactive games. Social life is a juxtaposition of contingent local action systems. There is no global regulation, but rather an infinity of local orders regulated at the micro-level. To some degree, institutionalisation does not interfere in the games that actors play because in the final analysis, institutions can be reduced to local concrete action systems. This posture logically leads to the negation of the specific features of political institutions. The categories of the 'political' become obsolete: politicians, parties, ideologies are of no greater significance than other sectors of social life. To a certain extent, GAPP researchers partially share this assumption regarding the individualistic substance of institutions. Nevertheless, they recognise the importance, variety and hierarchy of institutions which structure social life, and in particular the importance of political institutions. A second difference appeared in the 1980s, with the CSO researchers increasing focus on intra-organisational issues counterbalanced by the GAPP scholars' consideration of inter-institutional concerns (Smith 1999, pp. 111-131).

At the centre of this *continuum*, rational choice institutionalists regard institutions as a set of rules which channel and stabilise individual behaviour. According to the influential analysis of O. Williamson (1985), the constitution of institutions may be desired by actors as a means to reduce the transactional costs which might be incurred should such structure not exist. Historical institutionalists share a close definition of institutions, but in an extended way. According to them, institutions are the set of official and officious procedures, protocols, norms and conventions which link individuals to social life. Institutions are not a simple variable but rather constrain and refract political life. Seen from this angle, historical institutionalism constitutes a powerful theory to analyse national differences of implementation of global policies. Obviously, the main difficulty consists in selecting the institutions which really explain

the evolution of a society (class-structure, form of the state, centre-periphery relations, etc.).

Sociological new institutionalist theoreticians provide the broadest definition of institutions, according to which the entire social life is composed by institutions. Institutions include both formal rules (routines, procedures, conventions) and informal rules (beliefs, codes, values) and impose regularity upon human behaviour by limiting the extension of what and how actors should think. In such an analysis, the term 'institution' tends to be conflated with a metaphor of all organised fields of human activity (Thoenig 2000, 455-460). Regularity is imposed in two ways: firstly, through the social control exerted by rules and the correlating physical coercion (police, law, justice); second, conformism is infused through the socialisation of individuals upon the culture of institution. The CERAT can be considered as the missing link between historical and sociological new institutionalism. From its point of view, the rise of public policies in modern states tends to accentuate the division between sectors (transport, industry, agriculture, and so on). Each sector develops its own type of regulation based on institutional interactions (parties, decentralised administrations, central administrations, trade-unions, etc.). In this way, there is a relative isolation of the logic of action between different sectors. The resemblance to sociological new institutionalism is more closely related to a different vocabulary than to a markedly different viewpoint. To a certain extent, the Grenoblois school has a tendency to substitute the term 'sector' in place of 'institution'. Nevertheless, substantial variations remain, including, for example, the question of fragmentation of institutional order.

### **Rationality and equilibrium of agencies**

New institutionalists and French policy analysts have always debated on the specificities of agency. The first debate concerns the question of which rationality model to adopt. A clear division separates those scholars who favour an instrumental model of rationality from the supporters of a more limited rationality. The second debate relates to the dynamics of interactions. In other words, are actors' games stable or unstable systems?

With regard to the debate on rationality, at one extreme, rational choice theorists suggest that individuals act always in order to maximise their position. Their preferences are exogenous and can be deduced according to the context. These preferences can be aggregated in order to explain collective action. This model would work independently of the social context. In France, this theoretical trend has received very little attention. However, the concept of '*bounded rationality*' developed by H. Simon (1957) was adopted by many French sociologists. Drawing on the works of R. Boudon (1979), this concept forms one of the foundations of the CSO and the GAPP works. By rejecting the vision of a human being acting in accordance with instrumental rational criteria, the bounded rationality model revealed an individual who lacks information, who does not choose the optimal solutions and whose preferences are endogenous but neither stable, nor hierarchised. From this perspective, the question of the real difference between the last works of CSO researchers, the actual investigations of the GAPP members and rational choice theorists in the field of individual rationality can appear to be obscured. Yet the three theories actually share several assumptions such as the strategic behaviours of actors and the constraints imposed by the rules. However, as suggested in the previous paragraph, rational choice institutionalists consider rules as the product of actors and suppose that they maintain a relative permanence throughout time and space. In turn, according to the CSO and GAPP

postulates, rules are constantly questioned and reformulated through interactions. In the first case, actors have a panoramic vision of the different options available and their preferences are stable, while in the second case, actors interact blindly and favour short-term calculus.

Whereas the CSO-GAPP theory is a micro-application of the concept of bounded rationality, sociological institutionalism constitutes a macro-perspective of the works of H. Simon. As suggested by J.G. March and J.P. Olsen, actors act rationally within their immediate context. They try to maintain or improve their position *vis-à-vis* the other actors. But, in variance with the CSO version, actors are only able to imagine and develop strategies within a given cognitive field circumscribed by the institutions. This point of view is close to the historical institutionalist neo-Weberian perspective which considers that actors do not operate as rational maximisers but rather as satisficers who proceed in accordance with an axiological rationality model. Their strategies, but also their goals, are shaped by institutions. In this sense, collective preferences are endogenous and require be explained. In the approach promoted by CERAT, actors also interact within a policy network, but this can be divided into two different intellectual dimensions: the *fora* and the arenas. The former refer to the sites where global solutions are debated at the level of the society, while the latter refer to the internal deliberations on public policy. This distinction exposes the distinct levels of action which associate political and social actors on a strategic and cognitive basis. As P. Hassenteufel and A. Smith (2002, pp. 53-73) underline, one of the main challenges of this approach, but also of the sociological new institutionalism, is to explain the relation between the socialisation of actors and the elaboration of driving representations by these actors. In order to address this issue, it is necessary to focus on the notion of learning. In fact, learning as defined by new institutionalist authors appears to be a relatively passive

intellectual process through which actors integrate knowledge and practical experience (Bennett, Howlett 1992, pp. 275-294). Learning as conceptualised by sociological or historical institutionalists fits pretty well with the CERAT analysis which focuses on actors in order to understand their decisions. To a lesser extent, the notion of learning is compatible with the CSO and GAPP initial approaches stated by J.-C. Thoenig (1973) but not with the strategic analysis as it was formulated by M. Crozier and E. Friedberg in the 1980s (1980, p. 101) since these latter consider learning from a much more active point of view.

With respect to the question of the stability of actors' interactions, J.-C. Thoenig (2002, pp. 127-137) points out that one of the main differences between Anglo-Saxon and French acceptances of agency within institutions lies in the importance of conflict. Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian new institutionalists conceive of a world in which actors are guided by institutions which ensure the continuity, the equilibrium and the global functioning of society. From the rational choice perspective, conflicts are avoided by the existence of rules and sociological and historical institutionalists recognise the institutional cognitive constrain which avoids the conflicts. In this 'zero-sum game' the routine always wins. In turn, according to French researchers, institutions depend on power relations between opportunistic actors. Discontinuity, ruptures and temporary local regulations are stressed. The CSO actors act in accordance with their own interests, the CERAT actors proceed to defend their representations and the actors of the GAPP live in irreconcilable dimensions (Dupuy, Thoenig, 1985). Conflict is not automatically resolved by the transcendence of rules. This lack of equilibrium explains the partial adoption of some new institutionalist tools such as the '*garbage can model*' (Cohen, March, Olsen 1989, pp. 294-323), whose properties are used to describe the initial disorder of a policy... in turn, the new institutional

consequences of equilibrium through the routinisation of decisions are generally abandoned by French authors.

### **Ideas as ‘an ever more’ central issue**

The role of ideas has become a central issue of policy analysis since the revival of the new institutionalist trend (Radaelli 1995, pp. 159-183; Rhodes 2000, pp. 345-363). Notions such as ‘*advocacy coalitions*’, ‘*governance narratives*’ or ‘*epistemic communities*’ have brought new perspectives to our understanding of policy process. In France as at the international level, debate sets the supporters of an actor-centred explanation of ideas against those who favour the independence of the ideational sphere.

For idealists, ideas are independent variables which build the social field of public policies. The main question therefore is how do they influence politics? Idealist theorists oscillate between the complete and the partial autonomy of ideas. According to J.W. Meyer and B. Rowan (1973: pp. 340-363) the power of ideas is strong. As previously stated, institutions guide the individual consciousness, but on a greater scale, institutions also relate to meta-behavioural representations which define society (justice, free-will, etc.) and institutions must fit with societal values to be accepted as legitimate. Nevertheless, by focusing on the diffusion of such meta-representations, rather than on their origins, sociological new institutionalists neglect an important aspect of the ideational issues. According to the personal version of historical institutionalism developed by P.A. Hall (1993, pp. 275-296), ideas are the products of interactions. P.A. Hall shows how the diffusion of ideas is mediated by the institutional setting of society. In the case of the conversion of British politicians to neo-liberal economic policies, P.A. Hall demonstrates the progressive paradigm shift from Keynesianism toward monetarism through a process of social learning functioning between institutional

actors. P.A. Hall stresses the role of leaders and experts in explaining these modifications. Rational individuals promote their ideas on the institutional scene according to their own interests. The researchers of the CERAT develop a similar vision of representations, but they are less categorical on the origins of ideas. According to them, a political problem requires the application of several ideas in order to resolve it. The actors involved in finding a solution try to convince the others of their superiority. Within the *fora*, ideas are exchanged and shaped by debate. The main difficulty is to elaborate a solution considered sufficiently legitimate to attract a high number of supporters. Legitimacy can be obtained by harmonizing the representations of a sectoral policy (*'référentiel sectoriel'*) with the representations of the whole society (*'référentiel global'*). For example, the shift which took place during the 1980s from productivism to a more qualitative-oriented approach of French agriculture corresponded to a major socio-economic change of global *référentiel*. Although the researchers of the CERAT do not subscribe to a vision of ideas as spontaneous generation, but rather consider them as the product of struggles, they adopted what P. Muller called a *'moderate constructivism'* (2000, pp. 189-207), in assuming that 'some ideas' transcend the individual action.

In turn, for the supporters of the independence of the ideational sphere, ideas merely constitute dependent variables, since they are categorically and entirely built and transmitted by the actors. In this case the question therefore becomes how politics influence ideas? CSO members and rational choice institutionalists do not focus precisely on representations which are considered as epiphenomena of actors' interactions. However, in the case of the CSO there are major differences between the way M. Crozier handles public organisations in 1964 in the *Bureaucratic Phenomenon* and the way he and J.-C. Thoenig proceed in their paper on *'cross-regulation'* (1975)



based on the first approach of J.-C. Thoenig (1975). In the *Bureaucratic Phenomenon* M. Crozier comes quite close to the sociological new institutionalist paradigm when dealing with cultural determinism in chapter four (Grémion 1992, pp. 5-20). In turn, the 1975 paper is based on a more methodological individualist approach. Nowadays, the CSO leaders accept the importance of ideas, but only if they are used as resources within strategic interactions. There is no evidence of transcendence (Pongy 1997, pp. 89-103). As declare J. Leca and B. Jobert (1980, pp. 1125-1170) '[...] *the actor is king...but the king is naked*'. There are similar conjectures in the works of the GAPP researchers; however, systemic analysis does not negate the weight of ideas as long as it is assumed that they are produced by actors.

### **The problem of change**

The explanation of change is a real challenge for all theoretical frameworks since it tests their solidness and heuristic capacity. Over the last twenty five years, several changes have undermined the socio-economic system established after the Second World War: economic crisis, the consolidation of neo-liberalism, the parallel processes of decentralisation and global regionalisation, etc. Before proceeding with a comparison, it is necessary to premise that not all theories deal with issues of change in the same way, nor do they adopt the same level of analysis. While the authors of the CSO, the rational choice theorists and, to a lesser extent, the members of the GAPP focus on internal changes in a synchronic fashion, the historical and sociological new institutionalists and CERAT researchers are more interested in the relation between internal and external changes in a diachronic way. Whilst the former develop a meso-level interrogation by asking 'how does a policy change?', the latter orientate new inquiry toward the question of 'why does a policy change?'. However, since the end of the 1980s, major shifts can

be observed in the theory of public policy. At the international level as in France, the question of the reintegration of politics in a changing environment transcended the national and theoretical fields of policy science (Duran 1996, pp. 108-118; DiMaggio 1988, pp. 3-21). More precisely, it seems that, following a common trend, new institutional theorists and French policy analysts tend to concentrate more and more on the role of individuals –and leadership– in the processes of change, an approach which was little followed until recently.

The followers of the first hypothesis generally consider that change is the product of agency. However, there are variations between the approaches. According to rational choice theorists, whatever the origins of change are, all modifications are defined by individuals in accordance with their own interests. The appearance and disappearance of institutions depend on their utility with respect to the actors' interactions. As long as rules are necessary to maintain low costs of transaction, they are maintained, but when institutions do not comply with their functions anymore, they vanish automatically. The CSO theorists have shifted from a rigid position to a set of assumptions closer to those of rational choice theory. By enlarging the focus of strategic analysis from organisations to the whole society, M. Crozier and E. Friedberg (1977) produced a very consistent *corpus*, which is also difficult to implement perfectly. From this point of view, institutions are stable and evolve thanks to the interaction of actors. It is more a spontaneous adaptation than a true movement of change. However, this analysis has clear limits since it complicates an understanding of profound transformations such as the decentralisation and the European integration. In the early 1990s, as part of an attempt to renovate this theoretical framework, E. Friedberg introduced the notion of '*integrators*' in order to escape the deadlock of stability (1992, pp. 531-557, 1993). An '*integrator*' is a theoretical compromise between a judge and a leader who regulates an

action system by channelling demands and modifying the balance of interactions. Nonetheless, an *'integrator'* cannot deal directly with global society, as society is itself constituted by an interaction of concrete systems in a sort of fractal order. Here, change is merely the renewal of one concrete action system by another. In turn, using the notion of *'nodality'*, partially inherited from the cross-regulation theory, the GAPP researchers were able to take into account recent changes in political institutions. The concept of *'nodality'* stresses the importance of those actors within policy networks able to concentrate different types of resources and to change the direction of a policy thanks to their intermediary position. These policy brokers are quite different from *'integrators'* since they endorse a key position between different networks which in turn reinforces their position. Nodal actors, therefore, simultaneously enjoy access to the external and internal sides of public policies. This notion also demonstrates the theoretical necessity of connecting policy analysis with the sociology of mobilisation (Duran 1990, pp. 227-259).

With regard to the second hypothesis, changes are usually understood by historical institutionalists as major changes, mediated by institutions. However, up until the 1990s little attention had been paid to internal changes. Drawing on the notion of *'punctuated equilibrium'* developed by S. Krasner (1984, pp. 223-246) to show how institutions simply respond to external changes, K. Thelen (1991) elaborated a model of *'dynamic constraints'* which emphasises that institutional changes do not implicate strategic actors only in times of crisis. Moreover, the manoeuvring of internal actors to enhance their position can provoke crucial modifications within institutions. In this way, K. Thelen reintroduces the notion of strategy into the institutional explanation of change. New perspectives have also risen within the sociological new institutionalism. A significant gap is emerging between contemporary new institutionalist works and the

first orthodox applications of this theory. Some authors criticise the vision of institutions as disembodied structures proposed by J.W. Meyer and B. Rowan (1977, pp. 341-363) in the 1970s, which they consider unable to deal convincingly with institutional changes. According to the latter, institutional changes are produced by the mechanism of '*isomorphism*' which consists of imitating the structural features of other institutions. From this point of view, short-term changes merely augment the move toward conformity. By introducing the notion of '*normative isomorphism*' –internal changes occur when various actors coming from the same institution diffuse their ideas in various institutions– P. DiMaggio and W. Powell (1983, 147-160) made the original theory more flexible with respect to the impact of agency and leadership. In their seminal article of 1984, J.G. March and J.P. Olsen, continued to break with this disembodied theory by stating the notion of '*educational leadership*', in charge to diffuse ideas within institutions –in opposition to broker leaders focused on strategic interests–. This concept was progressively developed by other authors such as P. Colomy (1998, pp. 265-300), who stressed the role of individuals in the process of change and turned to the concepts developed by historical sociologists to reintegrate a micro-analytical focus. Thus, the notions of '*institutional projects*' and '*institutional entrepreneurs*' designed by S.N. Eisenstadt (1980, pp. 840-869) allow an understanding of the mechanism of internal mobilisation with respect to a collective goal through the leadership of a reduced set of actors. In this way, it reintroduces the conception of Schumpeterian political entrepreneur. In the case of the CERAT, the role of actors in change processes has been taken into account since the early 1980s through the notion of '*mediator*'. These latter are conceived as intermediaries between the internal and dimensions of a policy. Firstly, '*mediators*' have a fundamental function of translation (not limited to the aggregation) of internal ideas of a given policy in a more general

language understandable by the rest of the society. Secondly, they import the social values of society to a sectoral field by adapting policy to social demands.

## **CONCLUSION**

Since the mid-1990s, the entire French analysis of public policies has provided grants to debate. According to some French authors, after rapid development from the 1970s till the end of the 1980s and despite increasing production of works focused on public policies, public policy analysis has now produced '*decreasing profit*' by demonstrating its incapability to explain and propose solutions to national political problems (Muller, Thoenig, Duran, Majone, Leca 1996, pp. 96-133). The main causes of this qualitative crisis seem to be the hyperspecialisation of policy analysts in micro-sectoral issues, the excessive dependence with regard to the orders placed by public institutions and an ambiguous relation to the international mainstream. Divided between a disdainful attitude and a fascination for foreign works –in particular the new institutionalist studies– which were suspected of reinventing the wheel (Friedberg 1998, pp. 507-514), French specialists of public policies '*[...] are much less to turn the acquis of the French research to good account in order to participate to the theoretical debates on the other side of the Atlantic*' (Hassenteufel, Smith 2002, pp. 53-73).

Although these three dimensions are important, I am convinced that the relative autarchy of the French public policy analysis field is the principal obstacle to its own renewal. It is no solution either to simply superpose the French problematic on international debate or to dilute the former in the scientific worldwide mainstream. As advocated in the introduction, French political scientists and new institutionalist Anglo-Saxon schools share many common features in spite of their distinct intellectual

contexts. The slow penetration of new institutionalist works into the French scientific community principally is principally due to the philosophical disagreement on the concept of equilibrium of agencies produced by institutions, which is difficult to accept in a scientific field dominated by Marxist and neo-structuralist theories during twenty five years. Nevertheless, these differences of interpretation cannot suppress a common growing interest in the role of ideas and leadership in the policy process. These perspectives also could benefit from transatlantic (and trans-European) links to reinforce public policy analysis.

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