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# Elites, Ideas, and Power in Action Re-Structuring the French Welfare State

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The purpose of this paper is to reintroduce certain dimensions of policy analysis into the study of institutional change, and to demonstrate how this helps us to better understand the process of state transformation. We look here at the role of political-administrative elites in decision-making for social welfare policy 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 begin by observing that, as far as social welfare policy is concerned, the electoral program of the victorious French leftwing coalition in 1981 proved impossible to implement. Of neo-Keynsian inspiration, and 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” was based on massive spending increases seen as an intrinsic good. The budget crisis that ensued, and the move to a politics of austerity in 1983, ensured that this policy never had a chance to be applied. If this were the whole story, we could invoke a change of systemic framework, from a Keynesian to a neo-liberal model of economic and budget policy as a seeping overall explanation. Indeed, the idea that an 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 policy, if it is considered a-historically. A closer look, however, and a restoration of historical process, tells a more complex story.

By means of a close analysis of the actions of senior civil servants who actually directed French social welfare policy in the 20 years following 1980, we show 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, this group of actors 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 throughout this period. (Suleiman, 1995; Muller, 2005; Jobert, 2005) In the social welfare sector, nevertheless, what we see is a re-legitimization of state action through the close control of social accounts by the state. Having observed this, it becomes important to seek the elements that allowed this policy change to evolve from the creation of

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from the French by Marc Smyrl.

discrete policy instruments (Lascoume 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. (Plan Juppé, 1995)

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 institutionalization at the controls of this policy of an elite group that shared both social background and professional trajectories. This group of senior civil servants became increasingly autonomous relative to the more visible holders of formal authority (ministers and members of parliament). In other words, we will analyze the strategic role of elites who seek to impose their stamp on policy. (Keller, 1963) This will naturally bring us back to a more general inquiry around the perennial question “who governs?” We ask this question in a particular context, that of a vast policy area central to the contemporary welfare state. (Leca, 1996; Genieys and Hassenteufel, 2001; Genieys, 2005)<sup>2</sup>

### **The Turn to Neo-Liberalism in France : Change of Preference or Change of Strategy for Social Policy?**

We begin from the assumption, now widely shared, that the overall cognitive and normative framework for public policy in France as elsewhere in Europe and North America was substantially modified over the course of the 1980s with the introduction of economic ideas inspired by the “neo-liberal” tradition. (Jobert, 1994; Theret, 1995) It remains to be verified empirically, however, what the effect of this ideological shift was on the actors directly involved on setting the agenda for public policy at the highest levels of the state.<sup>3</sup>

The bulk of research concerning the transformation of the French welfare state stresses the fact that governments of both left and right have sought to reform social welfare policy. (Palier, 2002; Merrien, Parchet, and Kernén, 2005) There is no doubt, however, that however much experts agree on the need for change, the French public has resisted any policy that looked as if it might be taking away benefits considered to be entitlements. For purposes of this paper, however, we will not concentrate on this aspect of the problem, focusing instead on the supply of policy options. To this end, we look at

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<sup>2</sup> 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. (Genieys and Hassenteufel, 2001). The empirical data, excerpts from interviews and sociographic statistics were produced by a field study coordinated by Patrick Hassenteufel and sponsored by the MIRE completed in June 1999. See also Genieys (2005) and Genieys and Smyrl, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> Our empirical study focused particularly on agenda setting for social protection policies underscoring the fact that, in this specific area, public authorities play na the role of initiator and motor by proposing particular measures and reforms. Programmatic elites, as will be discussed below, are a particular type of *policy entrepreneur* in the meaning that John Kingdon (1984) gave to that term. Beside their capacity for put forward policy proposals, they have acquired over time positions of power and authority allowing them to affirm new preferences.

the emergence of a distinct group of mediators who at the heart of the state apparatus shaped the tools of reform.

Our point of view in this inquiry, is a self-consciously Gramscian approach to collective action. (Muller, 2005) By this we mean that we will seek to understand how an elite group established its intellectual hegemony over a policy area by introducing and imposing a novel “world view” for social welfare policy. Taking this path necessarily leads us to question the nature of the change observed. Was it simply a change of strategy, or is it evidence of a more fundamental reformulation of policy preferences? In order to answer this question, our analysis must proceed along two dimensions: the vertical or sectoral, and the horizontal, or inter-sectoral. In other words, the definition of a new programmatic model around the affirmation of the leading role of the state in social welfare policy leads the elite group identified with this model to affirm its political authority vis-à-vis its “clients” within the sector (labor unions, employers associations, professional groups, etc) as well as seeking the maximum degree of autonomy from other elite groups within the government, and in particular its supervisory ministries. (Leca, 1996)

In this perspective, affirming a new program that moves away from the corporatist tradition of French social welfare policy and attributes a leading role to the state can be considered a criterion suggesting a change in preferences. Such an affirmation, however, tells us nothing about the actors who shaped the policies in question. Nothing, at this stage, prevents us from assuming that we are dealing with a group of senior civil servants who simply opted to readjust their strategies in order to maintain their comfortable position in the state apparatus. (Jobert, 1994; Lascoumes, 1994) What we must do, in other words, is investigate the interaction between the change in preferences implied in the programs and the concrete transformation of an elite or, put another way, between strategic adjustment and change in elites.

### **A Neo-Elitist Approach : From Elite Politics to Programmatic Elites**

What role do bureaucratic elites truly play in political decision-making today? 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 the role of change in public policy allow us to learn more about elites? (Schmidt, 1999) Putting forward the hypothesis that the creation of programmatic elites (and in particular what we have referred to elsewhere as ‘*l’élite du welfare*’ (Genieys and Hassenteufel, 2001, Genieys, 2005a) identifiable by its implementation strategies that are not only instruments for action but a genuine vision of the role of the state in the 1990s constitute the beginning of an answer to these questions.

The line of enquiry suggested here, moreover, articulates the question of change in policy with that political transformation. In this way, a renewed neo-elitist perspective leads us to combine the investigation of policy choices with analysis of the production of consensus around democratic institutional procedures. (Field and Higley, 1980; Burton

and Higley, 1987; Field, Higley and Burton, 1990) More recently, the study of elite sociology, by emphasizing what takes place concretely behind the screen of formal authority (of a President or Prime Minister, for example) underscores the necessity of understanding the logics of political action by analyzing all of the actors who participate in the decision-making process. (Genieys, 2005b) In this perspective, Zartman(1982) directs our attention to the distinction between core elites and general elites, in order to understand how the ideas at the origin of policies emerge and are imposed. Similarly, Suzanne Keller (1963), in her critique of the power elite thesis, suggested that we look at the strategic role of certain elites (strategic elites) understood as those able to act directly on power, notably through policy choices. For theoreticians of democracy, meanwhile, choice, just like policy formulation, is a field of research that allows us to observe the tension between the expression of ideological pluralism and the proces of inter-elite aggregation. (Giddens, 1974; Sartori, 1987) Certain 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 seek to establish the point that a change in policy can also have its effect on the whole of the relevant institutional configuration.

### ***A policy Sector in Transition: The Crisis of French Keynesianism?***

The argument of this paper is intended to be generalizable, but rests on a specific case study. How can we select a particular sector as representative of the broader institutional crisis that is currently facing the French state? The social policy sector, and more precisely policies such as health insurance and family support policy are characterized by ongoing budgetary constraints. This is not, moreover, a sector know as “prestigious” for career purposes among senior civil servants. As such, it is an interesting “least likely” case for resistance to the ideologically-inspired budget cutting of the neo-liberal “state economists.” (Jobert, 1994) What comes out of our study, is the finding that social welfare policy is best explained not by the ideological victory of “neo-liberal” ideas – or the successful resistance of Keynesian ones – but rather by the rise of a new collective actor within the sector itself.

The choice of a spending, rather than a revenue producing, policy area is 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 – conflicts which frequently could be settled only by intervention of the Prime Minister. (Leca, 1996) We will show how this constraint had direct effects on the structure of policy programs in this period, as these were put forward by an emerging elite group. The attempt by the Ministry of Finance to exercise effective oversight over social policy actually encouraged the emergence of a distinct “sectoral” identity in the social sector. Indeed, our study of the career paths of senior officials in social policy shows that if, initially, the financial dimension served to limit their room for maneuver, it was subsequently transformed into a resource once these officials had acquired the requisite skills to manage it. (For typical career paths, see table, below)

The social policy sector is also “representative” 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; Marthiot 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 considered something of a dead end. (Eymeri, 2001)

What we will do is reverse this hypothesis, showing that the affirmation of a professional sectoral identity around a public policy program constitutes a significant change in the practical attitudes and practices of French political-administrative elites. In order to understand the complexity of this phenomenon, it is necessary to combine a detailed sociological study with the analysis of policy outcomes. (Genieys, 2000, 2004, and 2005)

### ***A Sociological Approach Focused on the Elites who “Create” Policy***

The considerations discussed above lead me to analyze change and continuity in policy according to a sociology 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 negotiation policies (top political officials including ministers, the Prime Minister and the President of the Republic).

This sociology of elites allows us to reintroduce the relationship between politics and policy around two dimensions. The first, inherent to the formal approach to power, leads us to show that, in parallel to the development of democratic governance, we observe the emergence of programs that largely escape the control of political professionals. The second is the capacity of aggregation / integration of certain policies on certain actors. (March and Olsen, 1989)

Following our inductive procedure, we will first carry 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. Subsequently, we suggest an analysis of the professional trajectory of this elite that lead 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. Finally, we will confront our hypothesis of the existence of a specialized elite with the record of decision-making for key policy episodes. It is only on the basis of this empirical observation of a capacity to influence policy, through instruments or ideas, that the hypothesis of the formation of a programmatic elite can be sustained.

## Identifying a Policy Elite

Statistical 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 of French political-administrative elites in general. (Kessler, 1986) One distinctive trait of the social sector since the 1980s is its relative feminization (22% of the overall sample were women. Analysis of the academic background of our sample shows a population marked by high academic achievement. 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.

Passage through the ENA is also 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 acquired there than in the contacts that one can acquire there. One alumnus of the ENA recalled,

*Allow me to underline that attending the ENA (where social policy is not taught) simply opened the doors to an administrative career for me. It made possible an internship in a prefecture where I began my specialization in the social policy sector. I pursued this specialization subsequently by opting for a career in the IGASS.*  
(Genyies, 1999, p. 39, a)

This observation can be generalized. Attendance of the ENA does not provide its alumni with specialized knowledge that will allow them directly to impose themselves in the social policy, or any other, sector. Such knowledge, as we will show subsequently, comes only as a result of a strong personal and professional commitment, a strategic choice in other words, that leads certain actors to pursue careers in this sector. The subset 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%; IGAS, 14%). The attraction of the social policy sector was not a result of these initial professional choices. Rather we find that the members of our sample have 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 do 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 allows 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 reach the limits of purely quantitative analysis. This approach tells us nothing about what may have motivated individuals to seek this particular career path. Further, it could be argued that the length of careers in this sector is a sign that it is a professional “dead end.” (Eymeri, 2001) This last assertion is subject to a twofold refutation. In the first place, there 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 sector did so as a result of a conscious choice. Their longevity, in this perspective, is voluntary, and reflects a long-term career strategy. This last hypothesis, if can be supported, would of course dovetail with our more general hypothesis of the progressive formation of a distinct policy elite in the field of social welfare policy.

#### ***A New Type of Decision-Maker: Institutional Socialization and Professional Expertise***

By combining our objective analysis of the career trajectory of administrative elites with the more subjective information gathered in interviews we can identify several indicators confirming our initial hypothesis. Self-identification with the “social sector” coincides with passage in certain specific professional positions. Among these are the so-called “social chamber” of the Cour des Comptes, and the IGAS. These are the institutional locations in which sectoral identity is solidified both through a “hothouse” atmosphere in which leading young talents are brought together, and through ongoing opportunity for socialization around a shared vision of the role of the state in social welfare policy. In the words of a hospital director, interviewed for this project,

*I came to this sector by way of the Cour des Comptes. During my five-year passage in the 5<sup>th</sup> Chamber (social affairs) I met a number of senior councilors, all with remarkably strong personalities. [...] Along with the other junior members, [...] I had the impression of belonging to a club, the auditors of the 5<sup>th</sup> chamber, before it was opened to other responsibilities. (Genyies, 1999, p. 46, a)*

This early “imprinting” of the importance of defending the autonomy of social welfare policy would be all the more important after 1983, when the “people from Bercy” (the ministry of economy and finance), made up almost exclusively of members of the *Inspection des Finances* began to exert financial oversight on the social welfare sector.



In addition, the network of professional contacts made at this time was reinforced by the prevailing practice of co-optation 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, p. 69, b) Indeed, interview subjects did not hesitate to give the names of those who had favored their integration into the sector and their career advancement. One subject emphasized this point, stating,

*In that milieu, everyone knows everyone, we've all met each other. We all read each other's work. This makes for a common fund of shared knowledge.*

It is around this culture of aggregation that newcomers internalized a logic of collective action set by those who have gone before.

In order to further our understanding of this group of senior civil servants identified by a “significant” career in the social welfare policy sector, we have identified a number of networks through our interviews. These are created by the dynamics of personal relationships as well the existence of the privileged loci of socialization enumerated above (Cour des Comptes, IGAF, etc) where a policy elite can construct its group identity. Self awareness of a certain capacity for expertise and of professional knowledge acquired over time provides an additional element of group identity as a distinct policy elite

In this context, we note the appearance over the past twenty years of three professional generations of actors who have been able to have “true careers” in the social welfare sector. 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).

Using the resources at our disposal, thus, (professional Whos? Who publications such as the *Bérard Quélin*, personal CV's and interviews) we were able to reconstitute the career trajectories of the elite actors in this sector (see Table 1, below) In addition, taking into account the period of entry into the sector allowed us to distinguish the principal episodes of institutionalization. Three “generations” of elite actors emerge from this analysis.

The first is that of the “elders,” a second is identified with the “1981 generation,” and the third with the advent of the “social managers.” The first generation is 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 “elders.” 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.

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 are 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.

The hypothesis of the centrality of a sub-set within the larger elite must now be tested in two ways. In the first place, we must assess its capacity for intervention in the definition of new policies. Secondly, we must determine the degree of its autonomy from purely political actors.

### **The Sociological Underpinnings of A Change of Preference : The Political Affirmation of a Programmatic Elite**

#### ***The Emergence of an Elite in the Social Welfare Sector: Imposing New Instruments of Public Policy***

The key criterion for the identification of this elite and the assessment of its influence is the direct role played by certain of its members in the definition of public policy instruments. (Lascoume and Le Gales, 2004). Our task is to assess their role in the formulation of a new frame for the process of decision. Our conclusions on this go against those of Bruno Palier (2005) in that we show that the process of transforming social protection policies was personified by a group of actors to which we give the name programmatic elite. Examples of recent reforms include the, capping of health-related expenses (*maitrise médicalisé des dépenses de santé*), in which the key role was played by Gilles Johanet while director of the CNAM, or the transformation of universal health insurance into universal health coverage, in which a pioneering role was played by a small group of senior civil servants led by Anne-Marie Brocas. A final example is provided by the global reform of the hospital budget (PMSI – *programme de médicalisation des systèmes d'information*) launched by Jean de Kervasdoué, 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 initiated by Jean Johanet in the 1990s. The strategy pursued by Johanet led him to create 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. This emphasis on the sectoral specificity made it possible for the budgetary constraints imposed by the Ministry of Finance to be accepted. Significantly, most of these innovative ideas would be taken up and implemented by governments other than those who initially proposed them, despite repeated changes of ministers and political majorities. We find them in the '*Plan Juppé*' of 1995 and again in the '*réforme Douste Blazy*' of 2004. (Hassenteufel, 2003) What we observe is a great

continuity in the content of policy decisions despite the fact that increasingly rapid shifts in political majorities have become a feature of French politics.

To this capacity to put its mark on sectoral policies was added a collective strategy of differentiation within the larger apparatus of the state and vis-à-vis other elite groups. In this way, 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, it can be found throughout the sector.<sup>4</sup> Central to this strategy is an effort 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. In some cases, the vector for these 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). This dynamic is illustrated by the comments of a former of the national health insurance fund,

*In late 1982, I spent time in the Budget Directorate for the sole reason that Jean Marmot, who was advising me on my career, was a personal friend of Jean Choussat who was then Director of the Budget. In 1984, I chose to return to the Social Security Administration, although I was offered a permanent position in the Budget. I came back as Deputy Assistant Director responsible for financial issues, which allowed me to put my experience in the Budget Directory to good use. Ever since, I have defended state intervention in a framework of social responsibility, but I recognize that this intervention cannot be carried out under just any financial conditions. (Genyies, 1999, p. 82. b)*

If the Ministry of Finance delimits the sphere of the possible, it is well and truly the sectoral elite that, once financial constraints have been internalized, remains solely capable of producing the necessary tools for social policy. In this perspective, the actors who make up the social welfare policy elite pride themselves on being able to do better than the Ministry of Finance in that ministry's own terms.

The desire to influence social welfare policy manifests itself through the development of a 'counter-culture' within most of the directorates of the sector's central administration (hospitals, social security, social work, public health). The case of social security is exemplary in this context, notably under the direction of Rolande Ruellan, as indicated by its leading role in the promotion of the ideas that make up the intellectual foundations of the relevant portions of the Juppé plan.<sup>5</sup> It is striking, indeed, to note the extent to which

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<sup>4</sup> The article authored in the journal *Pouvoirs* by François Mercereau, former director of the *Sécurité Sociale* and member of 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)

<sup>5</sup> Ruellan was director of the *Sécurité Sociale* from 1994 to 1996. When interviewed for this project, she stressed the central role of the working group that she had established within her staff in order to nurture the ideas that would eventually be taken up by the close advisors of Prime Minister Alain Juppé and find their way into the reform that bore the Minister's name.

the senior civil servants of this directorate claim paternity of this reform despite the fact that they have little political affinity with the conservative government that put it forward. It is no coincidence, moreover, that it is precisely at this time, in the early 1990s, that the personnel resources of this directorate were substantially increased both quantitatively and qualitatively. According to a former director, the purpose was “to put in place a genuine task force able to generate projections internally.” (Genyies, 1999, p. 83, b) In pursuit of this objective, the Social Security Directorate acquired the capacity to propose new orientations in public policy.

We should underline, nevertheless, that due to the political dynamic noted above there has been a steady replacement at the head of the Social Security Directorate of senior civil servants whose principal organizing vision was one of social progress by others who tend to privilege a more financial approach. As evoked in one interview, the makers of social welfare policy have come to think of themselves as a quasi-ministry of “Social Budget.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the trade-offs among ministries and their preferences made by the Prime Minister give 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 is more or less structural.<sup>7</sup> This in turn contributes to consolidating the collective identity of the social welfare sector, which is more or less forced to behave as a unitary actor in the ongoing game. This is all the more successful as the game is played well. In the words of one senior civil servant,

*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, 1999, p. 83, b)*

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.

### ***Affirming a New Preference : A Coherent Vision of the Role of the State***

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

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<sup>6</sup> 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)

<sup>7</sup> 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.”

cabinets in governments of the right as well as the left.<sup>8</sup> 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:<sup>9</sup>

- In order to preserve Social Security 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 while, at the same time, putting forward a financial approach to social welfare policy since the late 1980s. They emphasize the state's responsibilities in the social welfare area, which translates to a critique of the corporatist model that was at the heart of the traditional French approach to social insurance.<sup>10</sup> This affirmation of the role of the central administration with respect to the various Social Security funds is a recurring leitmotif. 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.<sup>11</sup>

The shift from a logic of equality to a logic of fairness is also evident. In this perspective, it is seen as necessary to target social transfer payments towards populations who need them most. 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.

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<sup>8</sup> Among published texts, examples include Johanet (1998), Mereceau (2000), and de Kervasdoué and Pellet (2002).

<sup>9</sup> 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) and, for a self-critique, Jobert and Muller, (1997).

<sup>10</sup> Certain scholars have chosen to emphasize the link between this neo-corporatist structure and the weakening of social democracy. (Damamme and Jobert, 2000)

<sup>11</sup> 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.

All of these themes can be seen as free-floating entities. Together, they constitute a stock or repertoire of possible solutions available over a fairly long term. Actors draw on this common stock of ideas and identity in order to wield influence in the decision-making process. In this way, the 1996 '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.

### **Conclusion : Beyond the Process of State Transformation – The Programmatic Elite**

In this paper, we argue for the reintroduction of elite analysis into the study of public policy as a means to understand the meaning of the “new democratic governance.” (Genieys and Smyrl, 2006) In contrast to certain critics we show that the opposition to the state implicit in the neo-liberal ideology which some have seen as triumphant (Jobert and Theret, 1994) did not result, in this case, in the rise of an altogether new ideologically-motivated elite – as it arguably may have done in other cases. (Dezalay and Gurth, 1994) Unlike the states of South America studied by these scholars, where the state tradition is recent and weakly implanted, we witness in France a reconfiguration within an elite that thinks of itself as “guardians of the state” and possesses the capacity to impose its programmatic ideas for public action.

Much as Suzanne Keler had announced years ago in her critique of C. Wright Mills' (1956) notion of the “power elite” it is indeed *beyond the state* that we must continue to seek and query the modes of expression of political pluralism. To this end, the analyst's gaze must shift from the traditional authority figures of the democratic state (elected officials and ministers) towards the elites within the state who give concrete form to policy programs. We should also move to reorient the sociology of elites toward the processes that lie within the formal structures of state power in order to focus on those actors whose opinions and beliefs give effective direction to public policy.

In this perspective, we have identified a new type of elites, a group of actors characterized by a homogenous institutional trajectory leading to the mastery of significant professional expertise. Such an elite is in a position to influence decision-making thanks to its capacity to act collectively on values, norms, and ideas over the course of the policy-making process. This perspective on the emergence of programmatic elites, that do not exist *ex ante* but are created through and by the decision-

making process itself, allows us to understand how it is that, despite the regular and frequent change in democratic majorities, policy orientations endure.