



The Spread of Vouchers among French Local Government: When Private Companies Reshape the Meaning of a Tool

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Vouchers, neoliberal tools or/and institutional innovation ?

Arnaud Lacheret

Vouchers are "instruments of public action" (Lascoumes, Le Gales, 2004) with a paradoxical scientific reputation. They have been more widely studied in the English-speaking world than in France, in spite of their widespread use there, particularly within local governments.

The reinvention and the transformation of vouchers into a political science object can be dated precisely. Milton Friedman, one of the fathers of the neoliberalism has relaunched the use of vouchers and tried to implement it in the public services, especially in the field of education (Friedman, 1955, 1962). He imagined a deregulated system where parents would be free to choose their children's school using a "school-voucher". He assumed that, as a targeted subsidy provided directly to families, vouchers would enable them to choose the school for their children, whether public or private, provided it follows the minimal standards requirements approved by the federal state.

In France, this tool appeared in the 1990s in a politically neoliberal context largely inspired by the Anglo-American model. It then became an ubiquitous tool of public policy in the sense of Lester Salamon (Salamon, 2001), a trade-off dispositive between the stakeholders of public action and, finally, a sustainable institutional innovation.

This article analyzes the pragmatic and ideological foundations of the voucher in France and offers a guide through its specific path in France to determine whether this innovation is the result of a public policy transfer from the other side of the Atlantic or if it is actually an institutional innovation, certainly inspired by neoliberal ideology but more underpinned, and anyway easily acclimated to the national context because of its appearance of instrumental neutrality.

The article first sketches two key notions: neoliberalism as ideology and vouchers as tools. Then it proceeds to a discursive analysis of the perceptions and feelings based upon the words of the actors that can explain their quick and wide spreading and appropriation, but at the same time the relative persistence of neoliberal landmarks within the conceptions and definitions made by political entrepreneurs of the concerned publics. The third part shows that, to become a legitimate tool of public action, vouchers have invaded the field of techniques in order to be politically more neutral because of the role of mediation and promotion played by the companies and organizations whose role was to promote and implement it, hiding its initial ideological dimension to make it more politically acceptable.

The ideal arising context of Anglo-American neoliberalism: example of the school vouchers

Neoliberalism applied to a tool, and particularly vouchers, finds its roots in far older references than Friedman. Regarding the school vouchers underlined by Friedman, we could go back to John Stuart Mill (1860) that mentioned, in an English context, the importance of the parents' choice for the education that could be given to

their children. Hayek, then Friedman, are identified as the American promoters of "neoliberalism" that Michel Foucault called a "technique of government" of self and the others aiming to spread the grip of the market mechanisms to the individuals and finally to the entire society.

In his Lesson of biopolitics, Foucault claimed that in neoliberalism, the market is first a competitive field where the individual is not simply a part of the trade, he becomes a real entrepreneur by itself (Foucault, 2004). This idea is indeed close to the one of the very liberal Ludwig Von Mises (Von Mises, 1927) that wrote about the individual as a planner that framed his own planning.

Applied to the educative institutions and to the tools of management, these vision, coming from the neoliberal corpus of ideas allow to expand to other fields the concept of quasi-markets (Glennester, Le Grand, 1995). With that mindset, the mechanisms of the trade model are transferred to the public education in a perspective of in depth reform of the education in the USA. This approach proposes a sort of alternative regulation, market oriented and individualized that can partially replace the state financing of the public educative system, considered as too costly.

The distribution of vouchers can thus substitute partially to the education budgets and represent a trade-off model between public funding and a totally private system.

The voucher has arisen in this new deregulated context.

In a neoliberal perspective, the state has to interfere only to allow the individual-entrepreneur to use his freedom of choice and to run the individual planning of action he decided to frame for his self. Therefore, the state has to guarantee the good run of the

market mechanisms to allow the individual to choose the training supply of his will. It is exactly the vision of Friedman and the school of Chicago when this latter "invented" the school voucher: the individual has to have the possibility to reach the market of education using an oriented subsidy he can use freely.

Vouchers, pragmatic tools stemming from liberal vision

This idea has been experimented in 1981 in Chile. Friedman became the advisor of the Government led by Augusto Pinochet to implement the first school voucher. It will then be adapted in diverse shapes, particularly in several American states (Milwaukee and a few other states as Florida which still use the "school voucher system") and also in a paragon of welfare state such as Sweden.

Vouchers have first been considered by American researchers as a tool of public action that was supposed to be "ideologically neutral" and could be compared to an element among other tools of a classic toolbox (Steuerle, 2000), then they have been widely criticized (we could quote the strong debate on US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos proposal of using school vouchers).

This massive rise of "tools" and "instruments" in the public policies in the 1990s is described as a "Revolution that no one noticed" (Salamon, 2000). Eugene Steuerle (Steuerle, 2001) argues also that vouchers are just tools among others, more or less efficient depending of the target and the considered public policy. According to them, vouchers are before all a social object, aiming to provide an oriented social subsidy to a well identified public of beneficiaries.

This notion of pragmatic tool that is absolutely not ideologically oriented could be found in other papers from researchers specialized in Vouchers. We could quote Gary Sturgess and Ivana Bodroza (Sturgess, Bodroza, 2011) that mention a technical dispositive, a tool that helps to level up the value of the public services when the market and the public policies are same oriented. In another book dedicated to the vouchers, Steuerle defines it as a subsidy that gives a limited spending power to individuals that can then select among a restricted choice of goods and services (Steuerle, 2000).

Thereafter, a lot of critical studies will challenge this idea of a "neutral" voucher and emphasize the neoliberal sense while criticizing its efficiency. The evaluations of the voucher system in the USA after the first experimentations have been the opportunity of severe controversies among researchers on this sensitive political subject (Martin Carnoy (2008), Wolf (2012), Chingos et Peterson (2013), Feigenberg et al (2017).

This definition of vouchers as tools is anyway the best to explain the success of their implementation in France, which is the subject of our research. We prefer this conception to the one of Harvey Rosen for example who considers vouchers only as individual subsidies dedicated to specific needs such as healthcare or education (Rosen, 2001). This definition is often used by the researchers aiming to prove that the vouchers have no political significance.

Within the expand, particularly in the USA, of the use of vouchers to other fields (housing, social aids...) and following Steuerle (2000, 2001), Lester Salamon (2001), Jay Greene (1998, 2001, 2011), Gary Sturgess and Ivana Bodroza (2011), we have isolated the 6 main arguments justifying, within this thinking framework, the need for a

government to implement a voucher system: promotion of free choice for a targeted public, the social equity (to legitimize to the tax payers the providing of an oriented social subsidy to a targeted part of population), the organization of competition between providers of goods and services redeemable by vouchers, the replacement of an existing subsidizing program, the restriction and capping of choice of the beneficiaries and the will to save public money while funding social policy.

The New public Management (Hood, 1991) has naturally appropriated this tool by using the following argument: a voucher policy has to be considered on the both point of view of the beneficiary but also of the tax payers who finance this aid. In this case, notions has "public value" (Moore, 1995, Alford, 2017) or merit goods (Becker, 1974) can be used. Therefore, the voucher is identified in the discourses of research as a tool based on a "neoliberal" conception of public policies and individuals, especially the social aid recipients.

This tool crystallizes (Halpern *et al.*, 2014) political and moral opinions and drives a definition of what has to be the targeted "public" of this social aids: this latter do not have to waste the public money nor than to believe that "the state can do everything for me" but to be guided in its choices while having the possibility to use the services of private providers put in competition by the regulator state.

In the French case, surprisingly, vouchers are not a subject of political debate or scientific controversy of this kind despite their intensive use since the 1990s essentially by the local governments. The generalization of the use of vouchers is a consequence of the global reform of the welfare states (Kersberger, Manow, 2008). The aim of this wide tendency is to individualize the social subsidies (this trend appears in the 1970s

and strengthen during the 1990s and the 2000s) and to implement them at a local scale with tools adapted to the various specificities of the territories (Esping-Andersen, 2008). The creation of systems of control of efficiency of these aids also multiplied within the local governments. The control of effectiveness are therefore nearly automatic in such systems. Then, the use of vouchers became relevant, consistent and rational because they can be spent only for a precise and specified good or service. Moreover, it is most of the time dedicated to a specific person (in France the name of the recipient is often written on the voucher) and therefore avoid to make an irregular payment that is really difficult to recover afterward.

Our main assumption is the following: if the spreading of vouchers in France could have been done in a so easy way, it is because vouchers lost their political and ideological dimensions. They have been depoliticized by the companies and the suppliers that aimed to purchase them to the local government. Thus, vouchers are instruments full of paradoxes: although they carry a neoliberal vision of public policies and of the public they aim to target, it seems that they have not been implemented for those reasons. Therefore, we will attempt to find an answer to the following question: "how these instruments stemming from neoliberal origins have spread so quickly in France, through its local governments, without any objections or remarks?"

This research problem has permitted to clarify the mechanisms that make of each voucher an implicit and hidden vector of the increasing of the neoliberal vision and gives an essential influence to the private sector, changing slightly the feelings and the underpinning political contents to make them, in fine, easier to be accepted and assumed.

This paper is stemming from a research conducted during a Ph.D thesis (Lacheret, 2014), studying the adoption of vouchers, their reinterpretation and their implementation within the French local governments. We have followed the rising of the vouchers in the Rhône-Alpes Region, pioneer in that trend and their transplantation to other regions (Provence Alpes Cote d'Azur) or other local government (Department of Saone et Loire and Drôme) that have duplicated those tools and their way of implementation.

This study has been based upon 45 interviews of local representatives, civil servants from the bottom to the top of the institutions and employees of vouchers companies to determine their perception of this instrument. I had the opportunity to access to internal documents of the local governments and of the vouchers companies, that have allowed me to run a qualitative survey on those three distinct fields, completed by interviews of actors from other local government to prevent any misunderstanding linked to local specificities. In the Rhône-Alpes region, place of birth of the first cultural voucher launched by a French institution, the aim of the vouchers was to create an access to cultural goods and services to a targeted population. Their quick spreading among the French local governments, shows very well the phenomenon of horizontal dialog among peers (Ferlie, Mc Givern, 2013) and benchmarking between same leveled institutions. The result of the survey shows that the actors, during each transfer and implementation of the method, have taken also the implicit neoliberal arguments of the vouchers, whatever they are used to. At last, the action of the vouchers companies has been decisive to introduce some pragmatic logics that help to make of this instrument a depoliticized dispositive, easy to be accepted because of its apparent neutrality.

1- Dynamic of diffusion and appropriation of vouchers in France

The first vouchers used in France to provide a public subsidy have been implemented in the 1990s at a national scale, essentially with a social purpose. We can mention the "Universal job service voucher"¹ or the "social aid personalized voucher"². But the voucher systems aiming to provide individual subsidies has been created within the local governments.

In 1993 the regional council of Rhône-Alpes created the "chèque culture". Dedicated to the high school students, this checkbook contained four vouchers for the purchased price of 10 francs that allowed to be redeemed in a library, a piece of theater, an entry to a museum or in a cinema. This kind of subsidy has spread widely: 21 French regions out of 22 had such a cultural voucher system in 2014. This experience opened new fields of development for vouchers: thus we could find training vouchers (Poitou Charentes region), Moving vouchers (Nord Pas de Calais Region, Var and Puy de Dome department), Health Voucher (La Réunion department), baby vouchers that can be redeemed to buy a baby seat (Bouches du Rhône and Pyrénées Atlantiques departments) and energy or sustainable development vouchers to help for the supply of wood boiler or solar boiler (more than half of the French regions).

¹ Chèque emploi service universel

² Chèque d'accompagnement spécialisé

To resume, in France, we can find two different kind of vouchers that, although they are used for the same kind of thing (subsidy to help a targeted public to supply a good or service), can be distinguished by their objectives:

- Social vouchers that aim to target and rationalize supply of social aid
- Vouchers that allow to offer non compulsory aid to a public that does not obviously have social difficulties but also to replace an existing cash subsidy to make the action of the local government more concrete and evident to the public.

Cultural vouchers: pioneers in local governments

Presented as a tool of cultural policy for the *Rhône-Alpes* region which presented it as the priority track of its policy of free access for the culture for the youth (Lacerenza, 2001)³, cultural vouchers has been transformed since its launching in 1994 until the last evolution into a chipcard in 2013 called "carte MRA". From a pure cultural instrument dedicated to the high school students of the region, it has become a "card of autonomy" including services going far beyond culture (sport, health...) Cultural vouchers can therefore been considered as tools presenting a supply and providing freedom of choice. The way they are used is philosophically at the opposite of traditional cultural policy which is a support to the demand.

³ LACERENZA Sabine, «L'impensé des études sur les effets des politiques de tarification - L'exemple du chèque culture en région Rhône-Alpes », in Olivier Donnat, Sylvie Octobre (dir.), *Les publics des équipements culturels – Méthodes et résultats d'enquêtes*, Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, Département des Études et de la Prospective, collection Les Travaux du DEP, 2001, p.170

We find this idea in the arguments developed in the interview of Hervé Mariton⁴, Vice-President in charge of cultural affairs in 1998 or of Amaury Nardone⁵, President of the cultural commission of the Regional Council when they talk about a political divide on the perception that politicians have on cultural vouchers.

Those politicians share the same vision of the vouchers as a tool to ease the freedom of choice while constraining indirectly the use of public fund by obliging the beneficiary to spend it for a determined type of good or service.

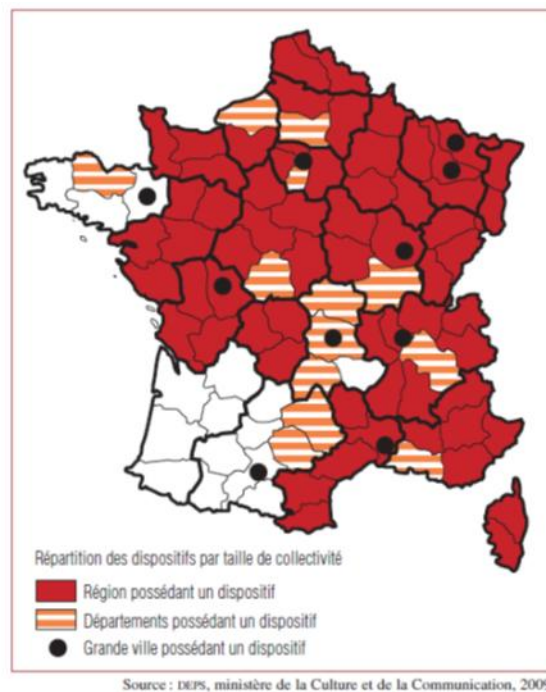
Surprisingly, the rotation of political power from right to left within the regional council did not curb the use of vouchers in Rhone-Alpes nor in the other regions. The regional elections in 1998 and then in 2004 were both strong defeats for the right and leaded the left to rule 21 regions out of 22. Nevertheless, the spread of the vouchers increased: "art vouchers" in Ile de France Region, 2001, "book and cinema vouchers" in Provence-Alpes-Cote-d'Azur, 2001... The departments followed the same way with, among others, the "cultural vouchers" of the Var department, first one of a series of imitation of the Rhone-Alpes cultural vouchers.

This unexpected spreading all over the French local government conducted the French Ministry of culture to run a survey to list them. Thus, Francois Rouet tried to map the existing cultural voucher systems in France (Rouet, 2009).

⁴ Entretien avec Hervé Mariton, Crest, 15 avril 2000

⁵ Entretien avec Amaury Nardone, Charbonnières les Bains, 1^{er} mars 1999

Figure 1 : Local governments using cultural vouchers in 2009



Meanwhile, other vouchers are locally developed, enlarging the range of policies: we can find "sport vouchers" to pay the membership fees in sports clubs for the young people (Midi-Pyrénées and Limousin Region) or wide ranged vouchers for high school children mixing sport, leisure and cultural subsidies (Drome and Allier departments).

The example of cultural vouchers, because of its popularity and its good reputation facilitates the understanding of the surprising lack of political divide about them in France, especially comparing to the struggles and controversies about vouchers in the USA. The liberal parenthood is not easy to find and also not claimed by the actors. That is why the spreading of vouchers among French local governments is therefore quite consensual.

After this study of the way of development of the cultural voucher, a question arises: can we really consider that this spreading can be identified as a development of a neoliberal vision of the public of public policies?

2. Are French local vouchers some hidden neoliberal tools?

2.1 Some parceled and diverse arguments

The various interviews conducted during the survey enable us to compare the arguments used to explain the implementation of voucher systems by the actors of French local governments with those developed by the different Anglo-Saxon searchers in the 1990s and 2000s presented in our introduction.

Nonetheless, the actors have not taken the whole neoliberal *doxa* supporting the implementation of vouchers as described above: furthermore they always refer in the interviews to at least one arguments advanced by this *doxa*. Each actor use the most convenient dimension for his purpose but shows no full support to the neoliberal ideas. Some actors will thus emphasize on the free choice argument⁶, while others will put a stress on the role of vouchers to make a costly targeted social subsidy accepted by the population by presenting it as a "merit good" with "public value", using the definition of Steuerle "choice and equity"⁷. Some others insist on the fact that vouchers help to increase the competition within a market⁸ but vouchers can also be introduced to replace an existing program⁹. We can find in the interviews the argument based upon

⁶ Interview with Amaury Nardone, Lyon, 10 February 2010

⁷ Interview with Joël Crémilleux, Head of services of Drôme department, Valence, 11 July 2011

⁸ Interview with Nicolas Gomord, Head of sport and youth department, Drôme, Valence, 11 July 2011

⁹ Interview with Brigitte Ducourtil, Head of energy department, Rhône-Alpes, Lyon, 28 April 2013

the fact that vouchers can be tools to restrict the choice of their users. We can particularly quote the interview of the former General Director of the Saône et Loire department¹⁰ when talking about the vouchers used to provide a social aid for disabled people. At last, the financial argument upon which the supply of a subsidy with vouchers should be a way to save public money is one of the well developed argument found in the interviews of the actors dealing with the social aids¹¹.

In addition to those classic arguments, stemming from the Anglo-Saxon literature, two new arguments, far more pragmatic and less neoliberal arose from the survey : the vouchers can be considered as tools of communication, they can materialize the social subsidy easier and make it become concrete in the eyes of the beneficiaries. The other argument is the fact that the vouchers can simplify the administrative process and instructions of the subsidies. The externalization of the instructions of the individual demands to the private sector (the voucher company) makes the provision of public service more fluid.

2.2 The various "public" of the vouchers: a multiple target that differs according to sectors

The interviewed actors emphasize far less on the political sense of vouchers than on their usefulness to allocate the subsidy. Vouchers definition, in their mind, fits with the broad definition given by Harvey Rosen (Rosen, 2001). Contemporary actors, even if they adopt parts of the discourses inspired by the neoliberal model, are promoting *in*

¹⁰ Interview with Pierre Bucco, Vesoul, 31 January 2013

¹¹ Boris Vallaud, 3 march 2013

fine a depoliticized definition of vouchers linked to their apparent neutrality and their pragmatic aims that seem to make possible their spreading among various local governments ruled by a majority of left politicians during the survey. Vouchers do not display political intention in the same way that a too politicized instrument could do. It becomes an object of compromise.

One of the stakes of this study was to interview some actors on their estimated usefulness of vouchers and therefore, to find out what was their underpinning images of the beneficiaries. Then appeared an important difference of conception between two types of representation they had about the beneficiaries of facultative subsidies such "cultural vouchers" and more social oriented vouchers.

In the case of the providing of social aids to the "public", this one is imagined as an ensemble of persons whose rationality is bounded and for that reason, is watched with a certain paternalist mistrust in the eyes of elected politicians, public managers and operational civil servant¹². "Public" is supposed not to be enough mature - for example, a manager of a social department in a local government claims that "those people are not able to understand everything"¹³ - and are not able to use their subsidies properly. To restrict their choice by orienting their expenses with a voucher is considered as a manner to frame and to actively help the beneficiaries according to norms established by the public service.

On the contrary, the public targeted by non social vouchers is described as less immature, more responsible. He has a certain sense of initiative and is "naturally" on

¹² Interviews with Boris Vallaud, *op. cit et Amaury Nardone, op. cit.*

¹³ Interview with Pierre Bucco, *op. cit.*

demand of more freedom of choice. This difference of institutional attitude does not rely on the nature of vouchers. Indeed, even if, technically regarding, the social vouchers permit some choices for their beneficiaries, this dimension of autonomy of choice is never mentioned during the interviews. However, we encounter the notion of freedom of choice on the first rank of the arguments served by the actors talking about vouchers aiming to provide non social aids (cultural vouchers, sport vouchers...)

Therefore, the public targeted by those non compulsory aids is put into position of freedom of choice, accessing to the private market by using its voucher. This neoliberal conception of empowered beneficiaries underpinned by this type of instruments should have conducted to a strong right/left political divide within the local political institutions involved as it has been remarked with the launching of the cultural voucher in Rhone-Alpes Region in 1993¹⁴.

Nonetheless, the political divide is far to be obvious in the transcripts of the interviews. From the left to the right side, elected people describe vouchers as instruments empowering the competences of the public targeted, offering it some margins of action and freedom it would use efficiently.

This positive perception is shared by the local civil servants that consider that the beneficiaries of non social aids are kind of responsible and autonomous actors, able to take free decisions¹⁵.

Thus, vouchers are not only a feature to materialize or to give shape to a cash subsidy, they also carry a representation, not only of the subsidy given, but also of the

¹⁴ Interview with Charles Millon, 10 February 2010

¹⁵ Interviews with Thomas Senn, Lyon, 20 April 2013, Patrick Darnaud, Lyon, 8 October 2012, Jocelyne Giamportone, Marseille, 11 February 2010, Stéphanie Loullier, Valence, 23 June 2010

targeted publics. The same instrument, used for different goals, carries different images of the public it is supposed to help beyond any reference to a concrete reality.

In the two cases studied, we can find another type of "client" of vouchers: the "public opinion", the "taxpayers" (Alford, 2002). A lot of actors are persuaded that by showing the fact that the destination of the subsidy is controlled with the allocation of vouchers increases the external legitimacy of those social aids and ease their acceptance by the public opinion, especially in the eye of the non beneficiaries¹⁶.

This claim is particularly mentioned by local politicians as Amaury Nardone¹⁷, Charles Millon or the socialist Pierre Martinerie, vice-President of the Department of Saône et Loire who insists on the guarantee to give to the population (composed of taxpayers) the proof to establish that the allocation of social aid is serious and that the public money is well spent.

These interviews show the plural and polysemic character of the argumentation aiming to legitimate the use of vouchers in public policy. Obviously they are inspired by the ideological baselines coming from the neoliberal conception of public policy but they do not take roots into an easily recognizable and well defined belief. In fact, the way they justify the use of vouchers is to be found outside of the intellectual paradigms and of the political field but in the instrument itself. The arguments borrow a lot to the words and guidelines of the companies that sell and market these vouchers and aim to submit their commercial arguments to their customers and to the institutions to which they provide those vouchers and processes of provision.

¹⁶ Interview with Joël Crémilleux, *op. cit.* and Boris Vallaud, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Interview with Amaury Nardone, *op. cit.*

3. The mediation by the companies: vectors and actors of the depoliticizing of a "cause without opponents"

The actors interviewed at all kind of levels claim that the management of a voucher system is complex. Most of times, they find it better to hire the technical knowledge to specialized companies, creating public private partnerships to externalize their needs. Although it is not simple to find how many local vouchers systems have been externalized to the private sector among the 43 found in 2009 by a survey lead by the Ministry of culture, the authors are conscious that "when the provision is delegated, the great companies can rely on their preexisting networks¹⁸". They deal with the technical launching of the vouchers, the monetary transfer costs and the communication issue while hiding their political sense. The technical and political costs of the vouchers can then be externalized by the local governments.

3.1 From service delivery to politic lobbying?

The companies specialized in luncheon vouchers or gift vouchers for example provide to the local governments a knowledge and some products coming from other kind of provision dedicated to the general public using monetary devices such as vouchers. Competition is really strong during the calls for tenders of supply of luncheon vouchers for public employees in French local government among the 4 leading companies: Edenred (Ticket Restaurant), Groupe Up (Chèque Déjeuner), Sodexo CCR (Chèque Restaurant) and Natixis Intertitres (Chèque de Table). Considering the maturity of the market of the luncheon vouchers and in order to take profit of the fiscal

¹⁸ *Op.cit*

and legal existing opportunities, those vouchers companies created new kind of products to enlarge their range of supply. They are similar regarding to their Business model (gift vouchers, social service vouchers...) but allow to create new opportunities of business development.

In addition to this range of classic vouchers, several companies created more specific vouchers, tailor-made for the local governments desiring to implement an additional aid to targeted beneficiaries. The "Groupe Up" (new name of Groupe Chèque Déjeuner) has developed, since 1999 a tailor-made vouchers department able to respond the demand of local government (named "adequation"). Its competitor Edenred created at the same time a department named "ticket à la carte" with the same objective. This adapted answer to the needs of local governments has corresponded, at the end of the 1990s, with the emergence of new cultural policies supporting demand by targeting specific groups that fitted perfectly with the use of vouchers.

"Tailor-made" products are indeed considered less as sources of new incomes for those companies but more than promotion and influence tools allowing to emphasize their knowledge and their brands in the highly competitive market of luncheon vouchers by showing their skills by tailoring specific vouchers¹⁹. It seems perfectly logical that the three biggest luncheon vouchers companies have taken profit of the opportunity represented by the provision of individual subsidies to a targeted population to launch the production of tailor-made vouchers. The cultural field has been the first to benefit to this new windfall and then, in function of the spreading and of the evolution of the demands of the local governments, new markets arose on fields like environment,

¹⁹ Interview with Stéphane Lefebvre, Epernay, 21 December 2012

transport or social aid. Companies had to reorganize their services and create additional departments dedicated to local governments, able to reply to the calls for tenders and manage the daily life of such devices.

This evolution had serious consequences for the companies and the local administrations. Therefore, "Groupe Chèque Déjeuner" (former name of Groupe Up) created in 2006, in addition of its "adequation" department, a specialized marketing service aiming to promote its tailor-made know-how to the local governments. This emergence of demand of cultural vouchers was perfectly fitting with the beginning of the spreading of "cultural vouchers" among the French local governments. The company was then going to accompany this new demand and then, more and more, to arouse it by an approach that looks like lobbying and influence strategy.

Meanwhile this technical response of the private sector and facing the increasing demand of voucher systems that local government thought they did not manage to deal with, a commercial organization arose in order to sell and promote these tailor-made devices. These changes often modified in depth the way the organization ran themselves. To fill this objective, the companies have had to change their purchasing methods: they did not have to sell a specific product by corresponding to a written need but to create the envy, to identify key actors, to be considered as a technical resource during the writing of a specification of call for tenders in order to, finally, give the operational work to their own department in charge of the execution of the tailor-made voucher systems.

This strategy shift has been conducted very quickly, in a few months by the board of "Groupe Up" (previously Groupe cheque dejeuner). This adaptation to this new

framework witnesses the will to increase the capacity of lobbying on local public sector by encouraging them to implement voucher systems for all kind of individual aid. Two other companies will operate during the same time such strategic shifts (Edenred and Sodexo).

3.2 The marketing discourse about vouchers: a public/private coproduced argumentation?

This marketing action is accompanied by an efficient lobbying. It has had the following consequence to generalize the promotion of an argumentative discourse emphasizing on the ethical dimension of the voucher system and claiming also its efficiency and its political neutrality. Vouchers and its promotion thus become a "cause without opponent" (Cloteau, Mourad, 2016, Juhem, 2001) but also indirectly a coproduced social piece of work.

The marketing action of the voucher companies targeting the local government appeared as one of the factors that explain this dynamic of appropriation and the quick spreading of vouchers among French local governments. By reading the sales leaflet of the vouchers companies, implementing a voucher policy permits a "guarantee of good use of the public subsidies by the beneficiaries", "a simplification of the management of the social aid dispositive" and "the anonymous feature that is a source of broader dignity, of freedom of choice and of ease of the contact with the actors of local life"²⁰

²⁰ Translated from the sales leaflet of the three biggest French voucher companies.

In 2010, in two business mails to the managers of department of youth of the local governments and to the elected in charge of this policy, the arguments were administrative simplification, control of the public expenses and clarity of the public policy²¹.

The companies that purchase vouchers played a central role of mediation by privatizing and shifting the way to provision the social subsidies by using vouchers. They have implemented an efficient representation of individual subsidy but have also legitimated a public/private partnership model. To take into account the cognitive dimension of these discourses of public and private action allow to explain the extent of tinkering of the political arguments used by both the political and administrative actors during implementation of the voucher system and by the companies aiming to conquer new markets by creating a relation of confidence and partnership with the local governments. The purpose of this use cannot be reduced to the only will to reply to a neoliberal quest, even though the neoliberal character of these tools and the pervasiveness of a neoliberal model can be easily shown and proved.

Conclusion

The research problem studied in this paper was to determine the objective reasons of the transfer, the implementation and the spreading of a tool - vouchers - presented as the emanation of a neoliberal paradigm of Anglo-American origins. This spreading among French local governments has occurred in a transversal way, without

²¹ Translated from mails sent by "Groupe Up"

any particular intervention of the state as has been the case for other public policies and also without stirring political controversy.

By taking into consideration the liberal origins of the vouchers assumed by several elected officials who participated in their introduction in the 1990s, we could have imagined that the discourses built by the stakeholders would have been quite radical and would have conducted to a major political debate among the local authorities where vouchers were implemented.

It was not the case at all because vouchers became a "cause without opponents", technical tools that are considered as efficient and useful, and whose neoliberal aspects did not annoy the actors interviewed for this essay. The segmentation of the targeted public seems to have conditioned the way of appropriation of meaning for each kind of voucher. When vouchers aimed to provide a social aid, they were described as tools of control and of restriction of the beneficiaries' behavior, whereas when they were used to provide (for example) an access to culture for a targeted public, the arguments were totally reversed - freedom of choice came always first to describe the vouchers during the interviews.

The adoption of this neoliberal tool in France was in fact widely based on commercial arguments developed by luncheon vouchers companies that had existed for a long time and that were sometimes already providers of the local governments. They have organized themselves to respond better to this rising opportunity, spreading it among local government by presenting it most of times as a tool of communication and of administrative simplification. Local politicians and civil servants used the vouchers to answer local, concrete issues while taking in their arguments the neoliberal rhetoric

found in the multiple studies published by the Anglo-American researchers but the wide spreading of vouchers among French local Government is clearly due to this "discourse assistance building" developed and provided by the companies.

Vouchers carry a specific representation of social aid and of its beneficiaries. In the end, they are vessels, vectors of a change in the conception of social subsidies and of their public, and they accompany the shift from a universalist logic to a logic of targeting of provision of subsidies that is very advanced.

Therefore, the emergence of vouchers in French local government in the early 1990s occurred concomitantly with the massive introduction of tools of "New Public management" within the public administration. The originality of this particular instrument lies mainly in his way of spreading and the "argumentation support" built by the companies in cooperation with the local government to introduce a utilitarian logic accompanied by a differentiated representation of the beneficiaries of the vouchers.

The promotion of these new tools of governance is the result of the times, the institutional history and the discursive research of coherence between public and private logics, not just their user-friendliness. By gathering themselves toward common representations and objects of compromise as vouchers, actors avoided useless struggles and political controversies. The apparent neutrality of the use of the instrumental rationality and its apolitical legitimacy implied the development of a normative dynamics shared among actors that seems perfectly relevant with the emergence of the New Public Management. The pervasiveness of a state of mind, of values, of common representations that avoid conflict and debates and focus on coproduction of institutional innovations has done the rest.