Profit-with-purpose companies and institutional dynamics: lessons from a public service company

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Résumé :

Les Entreprises à mission ou *Profit-with-purpose corporations* (*PPCs*) constituent de nouvelles formes juridiques qui incluent un engagement d'ordre social ou environnemental dans leurs statuts. Puisqu'elle est l'objet d'un engagement contractuel entre associés, il peut être attendu que la mission introduise une certaine stabilité dans ces entreprises, à travers une fixation de l'identité et des logiques institutionnelles. Mais que se passe-t-il lorsque la mission est formulée de façon à désigner un enjeu d'innovation ? Dans quelle mesure celle-ci peut-elle créer une nouvelle identité ou dynamique institutionnelle ?

D'un point de vue méthodologique, le cadre légal est trop récent en Europe pour permettre une analyse empirique des nouvelles formes de sociétés. Nous nous portons ainsi sur une entreprise historique de service public, La Poste, dont nous faisons l'hypothèse qu'elle constitue une entreprise à mission « pionnière ». Nous avons étudié la façon dont la mission a été définie et régulièrement révisée dans les contrats liant La Poste à l'État. Nous avons aussi identifié des raisonnements de conception utilisés par des équipes travaillant sur des initiatives sociales et environnementales, en collaboration avec le Département de l'Engagement Sociétal de l'entreprise.

Notre travail révèle un phénomène aux implications fortes : une entreprise à mission peut avoir besoin de continuellement réinterpréter sa mission et de réviser son identité en conséquence. Il indique également qu'une mission générative induit un effort systématique de définition de nouveaux concepts qui appellent précisément la construction de nouvelles logiques institutionnelles. Loin d'institutionnaliser des logiques ou des identités spécifiques, la mission apparaît comme un levier de renouvellement de l'identité organisationnelle et des logiques institutionnelles présentes dans l'entreprise.

Mots-clés : Entreprise à mission, organisations hybrides, logiques institutionnelles, innovation

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Profit-with-purpose companies and institutional dynamics: lessons from a public service company

INTRODUCTION

Our research is motivated by the introduction in the law of several countries of a new form of corporation, namely the profit-with-purpose companies (PPCs). PPCs are firms that request that an additional purpose, of a social or environmental nature, be introduced in the articles of incorporation alongside the usual profit-making motive (Levillain and Segrestin, 2018). Their increased popularity is embodied by the creation of new legal statutes in various countries that aim at providing PPCs with an adapted governance model. Hence, in the United States, statutes entitled "Benefit Corporations", "Public Benefit Corporations" or "Social Purpose Corporations", were created. Similar statutes have been introduced in Italy – "società benefit" statutes – and are currently under study in France, named "Entreprises à Mission" statutes. All of these present three key features. First, they define a clear but broad purpose that designates grand challenges the company seeks to tackle. Second, they require that the purpose be inscribed the corporate by-laws, as a commitment binding the corporation. Finally, this model defines an accountability framework, in which the CEO is then mandated to fulfill the purpose of the firm, and is evaluated based on the strategies she/he invents to do so (Hiller, 2013, Levillain et al., 2018).

On the one hand, studies on the concept of purpose have highlighted its cohesive dimension, as it designates a common vision for all members of the firm (Collins and Porras, 1996). The purpose is usually associated with the definition of 'core values and beliefs' for the company that enable the executives to create a sense of identity for their employees (Campbell and Tawadey, 1990). Indeed, according to Bartlett and Ghoshal (1994), a purpose-based management approach allows to increase employees' commitment by defining values and norms they can identify with. Because these common identity or values imply behavioral norms, we argue that they might convey institutional logics. Institutional logics are defined as: 'socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs

and rules' (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). If the purpose precisely defines some behavioral norms, we can rightfully expect that it embodies durable prescriptions for actions for the members of the organization, and therefore, durable institutional logics.

On the other, previous work on PPCs suggests that the pursuit of a purpose calls for innovation capabilities (Levillain, 2015). They have shown that the purpose can be more or less innovative or 'generative': its formulation designates concepts that can be more or less defined in regard to existing knowledge (Hatchuel et al., 2018). A highly generative purpose therefore refers to unknown objects or solutions, which require innovation resources in order to be conceived. We suspect the generativeness of such a purpose to entail certain organizational dynamics that might have an impact on the organizational identity and the institutional logics of a PPC.

Our paper is therefore aimed at tackling the following research questions:

What is the impact of the commitment on a purpose on institutional logics dynamics? Can the purpose be contractually set, but still open and generative? And if the purpose is established, does it necessarily freeze the organization's identity or institutional logics?

To conduct our research, we seek to empirically investigate innovation dynamics of PPCs. However, the introduction of legal statutes being quite recent, this makes it difficult to study the incorporated PPCs with sufficient hindsight. This is why we choose to study the case of a historical PPC, La Poste. La Poste is the historical operator providing postal services in France. This for-profit corporation is a former Administration of State that is entrusted with several public service missions that aim at 'ensuring cohesion of the French territory'. We therefore posit the assumption that La Poste is a pioneering form of PPCs. In this regard, La Poste could offer a useful insight on how PPCs operate on the long term. Indeed, by adopting a historic perspective, we can study how this PPC has formulated and reformulated its purpose on a decade-time span, and what innovation dynamics were induced by these changes.

Through our research, we seek to make the following contributions: First, this paper will result improve our empirical understanding of PPCs, by highlighting the innovation dynamics they employ to pursue their purpose. In particular, we will provide insights on how to properly formulate a generative purpose, by studying how La Poste has formulated and

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revised its mission over the last few decades. On a theoretical standpoint, we therefore expect to contribute to a theory of PPCs. We also seek to contribute to the institutional logics approach and the literature on organizational identity, as we will be able to describe how these concepts are affected by the pursuit of a generative purpose.

This article is structured as followed: we first review the literature on institutional logics and organizational identity, and how they might be shaped by actors themselves. We then expose the methodology of our on-going research work, which aims at 1) analyzing La Poste's purpose formulation and 2) exploring La Poste's systematic effort to regenerate its goals and commitments. We present our findings for each of these two steps, and offer some elements of discussion.

1. PROFIT-WITH-PURPOSE CORPORATIONS AS ORGANIZATIONS WITH MULTIPLE AND DYNAMIC INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS

In this section, we posit PPCs as hybrid organizations and therefore mobilize the institutional logics approach to describe identified mechanisms they employ to deal with this hybridity. We expect that the pursuit of a generative purpose entails certain innovation dynamics that might affect these institutions. Hence, we turn to authors who have described the processes by which identities or institutional logics are shaped or evolve over time.

PPCs AS HYBRID ORGANIZATIONS

Profit-with purpose companies are firms which pursue a goal of social or environmental nature, and that goes beyond the taken-for-granted objective of generating profit (Levillain and Segrestin, 2018). As they are willing to achieve a social or environmental goal, these firms can easily be considered as hybrid organizations. Summarizing existing literature, Mair et al. (2015) recognize three characteristics to hybrid organizations: (1) the involvement of a variety of stakeholders, - applying pressures on the organization through various expectations (2) the pursuing of multiple and often conflicting goals and (3) the engagement in divergent or inconsistent activities. As a result, hybrids usually assemble distinct organizational forms (Battilana et al., 2017). Among those forms, two are usually incorporated by hybrids: the charity and business forms. While the first one requiring the fulfillment of the social mission,

the second requires commercial performance from the firm (Battilana and Lee, 2014). However, apart from combining organizational forms, hybrids can also combine distinct identities or logics (Battilana et al., 2017). We intend to describe those two concepts according to the existing literature and identify how these can be shaped or constructed by actors themselves.

THE INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS APPROACH TO HYBRIDITY

Hybrid organizations can be analyzed by the institutional logics approach as a case of institutional complexity, as they necessarily face plural institutional logics (Mair et al., 2015). Institutional logics are defined as 'socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules' (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, p. 804). However, we can wonder how the concept of institutional logics relates to the concept of institutions. Institutions designate the 'supra-organizational patterns of activity rooted in material practices and symbolic systems by which individuals and organizations produce and reproduce their material lives' (Friedland and Alford, 1991). The institutional logics themselves "define the content and meaning" of these institutions (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008, p.100). They can be considered at the society level or at the level of organizational fields. They constitute what Thornton et al. (2012) call an 'institutional order', with each providing organization principles, symbols and practices for their members to adopt.

The logics are embodied by what Scott et al. (2000) call 'knowledge systems' or what D'Aunno et al. (1991) refer to as 'bodies of knowledge'. They frame "cultural-cognitive orders" (Scott, 1995) in the sense that they create cognitive frameworks for members to think and reflect on their activities. By defining these 'cognitive structures' (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008) institutional logics provide prescriptions for members' actions (Besharov and Smith, 2014). In this sense, "institutional logics shape rational, mindful behavior" (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008, p.100).

However, this approach does not consider actors as simply obedient to these prescriptions for action. According to Thornton et al. (2012), they may replicate existing logics, but are also able to innovate and transform them. Organizational actors therefore do hold some control over the shaping of institutional logics. In a later section, we will therefore try to identify existing literature dedicated to the shaping of logics by actors themselves.

TENSIONS RELATED TO INSTITUTIONAL COMPLEXITY

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Some organizations face plural institutional demands that are defined by Pache and Santos (2010) as "various pressures for conformity exerted by institutional referents on organizations in a given field" (p.457). According to Kodeih and Greenwood (2014), who cite Heimer (1999), organizations face institutional complexity when "the adoption of a policy or practice that sends a favorable message to one audience may simultaneously send an offensive message to another" (p. 18). Thus, when facing institutional pluralism, the challenge for the organization is to find ways to gain and maintain legitimacy towards the various institutional orders' referents – and thus achieve what Kraatz and Block (2008) call a 'pluralistic legitimacy'.

This pressure to answer to several and sometimes conflicting institutional orders may foster tensions within the organization (Greenwood et al., 2011). In this case, conflicts arise, that concern either the goals the organization should pursue or the means to be employed to achieve these goals. The degree of institutional complexity experienced in an organization depends on the number of institutional logics present or the degree of incompatibility between them. In the organizations described by Ashforth and Reingen (2014), for example, a tension between idealism and pragmatism was manifesting through an on-going conflict between the company's ideals and the necessity to run the company as a profitable business.

DEALING WITH CONFLICTUAL INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS

Since early works on institutional logics, authors have sought to identify the various responses organizations formulate to deal with their hybridity or institutional complexity. Some authors such as Battilana and Lee (2014) have undertaken a typology of these responses. The latter define four categories of strategic responses to hybridity: dismissing, cumulative, separating and creative.

We choose to present here Kraatz and Block (2008)'s four identified strategies to deal with multiple identities. First, actors can react with resistance, by refusing to validate some institutional demands, and therefore suppress the pluralism the organization encounters. This resistance or denial strategy is considered to be a dismissive one by Battilana and Lee (2014). Second, actors can compartmentalize their identities: by addressing the different institutional orders independently, they might achieve a coexistence of the logics. This is a 'separating' strategy according to Battilana and Lee. Other authors such as Oliver (1991) point to a similar type of response, which can be called 'compromise'. For example, according to D'Aunno et al. (1991), members can show signs of conformity to one logic without fully meeting the

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demands of its external referent groups. By achieving partial conformity, they can partly accommodate some of their institutional demands. Third, actors might adopt a reining strategy, namely, find a balance between the various demands that can be mutually dependent. This falls into the 'cumulative' category of Battilana and Lee (2014)'s typology, and can be compared to Oliver's strategy of acquiescence, which designates an effort to adopt several logics. Lastly, they can attempt to build the organization's own durable identity, for it to become an institution in itself. According to the authors, this can be done by integrating or transcending the plural pre-existing identities that the organization holds. They refer to the works of Selznick (1957), who stated that an organization may acquire the ability to redefine its priorities, reinterpret its identities, its ideals and purposes. If the organization can do so, according to Kraatz and Block, it might be able to formulate its own demands towards its constituting parties.

THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN IDENTITY

Kraatz and Block are not the only ones to have linked institutional complexity to the notion of identity. Other authors have undertaken the construction of the concept of organizational identity, which has then attracted a growing community of researchers, according to Gioia et al. (2013). These authors build on Albert & Whetten (1985)'definition of identity and define it as "those features of an organization that in the eyes of its members are central to the organization' character or "self-image", make the organization distinctive from other similar organizations, and are viewed as having continuity over time" (p.125). In particular, this last feature has sparked a debate among this community which relates to our research question: is it stable or can it evolve over time? Although some consider identity as necessarily fixed and enduring, others, such as Gioia et al , argue that on the long term, identity can evolve – they are labeled as holding a 'dynamic identity' point of view. These authors consider the identity as changing or capable of being changed by actors themselves. Battilana et al. (2017) support this proposition, and Battilana and Dorado (2010) bring to light the construction of identities by organizational members. In the case of the commercial microfinance organization studied by Battilana and Dorado, members combine elements from the development sector and from the banking sector in their activities. These elements were incorporated in the definition of human resources practices, such as hiring, promotion and reward granting, which all contributed to the creation of a new organizational identity.

In line with this point of view, Kodeih and Greenwood (2014) introduced the concept of identity aspirations. The authors study the case of French Business Schools that have to integrate a new institutional logic as they seek to internationalize their status. In this case, institutional complexity, through the introduction of a new logic, was considered an opportunity by some organizations to redefine their identity. This was completed by projecting the members into the future, and encouraging them to imagine what the corporation could become. "What matters is not how an organization sees itself—i.e., what it is—but how it wants to see itself—i.e., what it wishes to become" (p. 32). This result is of particular interest to us: indeed, we assume that, to fulfill these identity aspirations, the members must, to some extent, engage in a renewal of the firm's activities and purpose.

This literature indicates that an organization's identity, especially an hybrid's, may evolve according to its actors' vision for the future. However, we wonder how actors can shape their institutional environment beyond – or through – their organization's identity.

THE CREATION OF NEW INSTITUTIONAL IDENTITIES, FIELDS AND LOGICS

Even though it has been suggested that institutional logics can evolve over time, as actors contribute to their shaping, little is known about this phenomenon: how do new logics emerge or evolve over time? How are new symbols, values, knowledge created?

Glynn (2017) addresses this issue by describing how an institutional identity may itself contribute to shaping the institutions the organization is embedded in. According to her, identity can be an antecedent or a consequence to processes of institutionalization, but it can also constitute a mechanism of institutionalization in itself. To describe the process of institutionalization, the author refers to the concept of 'habitual typifications'. Institutionalization thus names the process by which these habits become sedimented so as to become taken-for-granted by actors. As a mechanism of institutionalization, identity contributes to maintaining, transforming or establishing institutions. Organizations, through the definition of their identity, can thus shape new institutional logics. Glynn (2017) considers "Market category emergence" as a process of institutionalization of 'practices, professions or logics' (p.253), whereby collective and organizational identities emerge. This process implies a "social construction of meaning by market actors […], so as to legitimate the nascent category" (p.252). To do so, the creation of what Glynn calls a 'collective identity' is a necessary first step. In the studied case of the new satellite market radios, organizations achieved this collective identity by defining the 'what we do' element. The author also

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mentions the works of Rao (2003), who studied the case of some culinary chefs claiming a new identity of their profession and advocating for the adoption a new type of cuisine – 'nouvelle cuisine'. According to the author, these efforts led to the institutionalization of a new logic for other chefs to follow.

Other authors have considered the processes by which new institutional fields emerge. Institutional fields are defined as 'those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of life' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983: 148) cited by Thornton et al. (2012). These organizations are also 'characterized by structured network relations, and share a set of institutions' according to Lawrence and Phillips (2004, p. 691). These two authors investigate the establishment of a specific new institutional field: the whale-watching industry. They identified two factors to this emergence, which are 'purposeful action' led by institutional entrepreneurs and 'institutional processes', embodied by the macro-level discourses. In these discourses, the concept of whale was discussed and constructed. It led to a personification and an admiration for the whales, that allowed for the activities of local whale-watching entrepreneurs. Indeed, this discursive activity at a macro level provided 'building blocks' for the entrepreneurs, as it legitimated their actions. In this particular case, the practices and ideas (type of boat, timing of tours, method of whale-spotting) of this new field were initiated by one entrepreneur and imitated by others, through isomorphism.

Lastly, according to Lounsbury (2002), professionals, and the knowledge they rely on, play an essential role in the structuration of fields and the diffusion of new practices. In his study, he observed that the rise of new professions was correlated to the appearance of new logics. He noticed that professions use and defend different bodies of knowledge, which then induced different practices. By a process of professionalization of the field of finance, the 'cognitive ideas' shared by actors had shifted from being rooted into regulative-related knowledge to being rooted into market-related knowledge.

This literature therefore points to the possibility of organizations seeing their identity or institutional field evolve over time, with the promotion of new institutional logics. Through the introduction of new bodies of knowledge, new practices can arise among an institution or an organization. Some authors also consider the identity as a possible intermediary in shaping the institutions in which the organization or its members are embedded. In PPCs in particular,

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we suspect that a generative purpose might engender innovation efforts that will necessarily lead to the development or acquisition of new knowledge. We can therefore wonder if these bodies of knowledge will provide members with new cognitive structures that can shape a new identity or new institutional logics for the company.

2. METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

To carry out our research, we chose to conduct a qualitative case study (Yin, 2009) of a historical PPC. Indeed, the legal-formed PPCs are indeed quite new and therefore only offer recent data about their management practices. We therefore turn to a for-profit company that might have pursued a purpose for several decades, without being an incorporated PPC. As we develop further, we chose the case of La Poste, the historical operator providing postal services in France. Indeed, it can be rightfully assumed that this for-profit company is a PPC, as it pursues the purpose to 'ensure the cohesion of the French territory'.

We therefore base our study on the in-depth analysis of one single relevant case of PPCs. As Siggelkow (2007) points out, a single case, if carefully chosen and analyzed with precision, can provide a solid basis for the establishment of a "free-standing theory", that is, a theory that seems plausible, and for which the case enables to identify the main relevant variables. We therefore proceed to explain the choice of La Poste as our empirical ground, before presenting our methodological setting.

CHOICE OF THE CASE: LA POSTE AS A HYBRID ORGANIZATION

We have selected La Poste as we make the assumption that this company is an exemplar case of PPC. As a public service organization and a former State Administration, La Poste has historically been entrusted with public service missions – aimed at ensuring the cohesion of the French territory. These missions have been formally defined and piloted through pluriannual planning contracts that bind La Poste and the French State since 1991. La Poste's purpose is therefore embodied in a contractual form. The former Administration has turned over time into a for-profit company, adopting for-profit limited company statutes in 2010, but still maintaining its public service missions. We argue that these two attributes attest to the PPC quality of La Poste.

As La Poste is a for-profit company pursuing a purpose, we assume that it can be described as a form of hybrid organization facing organizational duality (Asforth and Reingen 2014). First, La Poste inherited from a public service logic. Historically a State administration, La Poste became an EPIC (établissement public industriel et commercial or public company) in 1991. In 2010, La Poste adopted limited corporation statutes, but still remains a fully state-owned company. Indeed, the state still detains the entirety of its capital (73,68% directly and 26,32 indirectly through the shares owned by another public entity, named Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations – a public sector financial institution. The company still performs public interest services that are considered 'of general economic interest' (SGEI) by the European Union. From 1991 on, its public service missions have been specified in pluriannual planning contracts, in order for the State to ensure the execution of certain public services by the company. Its missions have also been enumerated and written in the law. According to the latter, there are four public service missions to be fulfilled by La Poste: 1) to provide the universal postal service 2) to convey and deliver the press 3) to ensure access to banking services and 4) to contribute to territorial planning and development.

Secondly, a commercial logic has been introduced through the liberalization as well as the diversification of its former monopolistic activities. Indeed, La Poste has stopped beneficiating from a postal monopoly since 2011. The company has also conquered adjacent markets where probability opportunities have been identified, such as fast package/parcel delivery, through the creation of the Chronopost service, for example. This diversification has notably increased in the 1990s, thanks to the creation of La Poste a separate legal entity from the state (an EPIC) and through the development of commercial subsidiaries. This representation echoes in the organization, where several branches and units have been mandated with the clear goal of finding 'new market opportunities'.

This duality of logics within La Poste has been pointed out by previous authors: Lefebvre (2011) mentioned that a duality had settled in the company, because of its development "at the crossroads of the public sphere and the commercial sphere" (p. 94). Vezinat (2010) also mentions two logics that are competing with each other within the company: a market logic and a public service logic. The author argues that tensions arise from this duality and burdens on employees. As she studies the specific case of financial advisors, she explains how these employees have to deal with contradictory prescriptions for their actions. Indeed,

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economically speaking, their jobs consist of selling banking products. However, when they are faced with particularly fragile populations, such as minimum-wage earners or immigrants without a legal status, they are more prone to adopt a public service logic, and therefore not do so, in order to avoid over-indebting these clients.

METHODOLOGICAL SETTING

Our research protocol is comprised of two steps. In a first step, we conduct a retrospective analysis of the formulation of La Poste's purpose. We look at the evolution of this formulation throughout the years by examining the former and current contractual documents binding La Poste and the State. We then link its evolution to the mention of new generative (innovative) concepts, so as to characterize how the formulation impacts the innovation dynamics inside the organization.

In a second step, we are looking to explore in more details the features of La Poste's innovation dynamics. We conduct an interview-based study to identify the mechanisms that are employed by the organization's members to continuously regenerate the purpose. We also carry out a qualitative analysis of a few initiatives piloted by the Societal Commitment Department of the company, as this will allow us to observe conception patterns at play within the company, that serve the company's purpose.

Step 1: Analyzing La Poste's purpose formulation

In this first step, we looked to analyze how La Poste has formulated and reformulated its purpose over the years. We seek to evaluate the degree of generativeness (innovativeness) of the commitments towards the State and other stakeholders can indeed give us an insight into the innovation dynamics related to this dimension.

<u>Data collection and analysis</u>

To do so, we intend to model the formulation of La Poste's purpose from 1991 to nowadays, through the examination of La Poste's contractual documents with the State. Indeed, in 1991, the Postal Administration was incorporated into a separate entity from the State, with full financing and management autonomy. This creation was also accompanied by the voting of a law that defined La Poste's obligations to fulfill four public service missions. In addition, it was agreed upon that La Poste and the State would regularly revise the conditions of execution of these missions through the negotiation of a pluriannual planning contract. Since

1991, there have been seven contracts concluded between La Poste and the State, that have covered seven time-spans: 1991-1994; 1995-1997; 1998-2001; 2003-2007; 2008-2012; 2013-2017 and 2018-2022. These documents are about 20 pages long and are usually divided into four parts, each dedicated to one of La Poste's four public service missions. These sections mention, more or less explicitly, the services that La Poste must conduct in order to fulfill each of these missions.

We have undertaken the coding of the formulation of La Poste's four public service missions so as to evaluate their generative (innovative) dimension.

Indeed, we to assess the innovativeness of the commitments by examining their 'generativity'. We borrow the concept of generativity from the CK theory (Hatchuel et al., 2018). According to this theoretical framework, a design process starts with a brief or a concept, i.e. an undecidable proposition: an object that can be described, but that doesn't exist (yet) in the current state of the art. The design process stops when the concept has been enriched with different attributes and that the knowledge has been expanded so that it can be realized. We have thus used this theory as coding method by identifying and ranking the concepts according to their degree of generativity for each mission and for each contract. For example, low-ranked concepts include services that were already known and had been previously delivered by the company; the conditions of their execution might have evolved overtime, but without redefining the core activity they refer to. An example would be 'Delivering the mail six days out of seven on the whole territory'. High-ranked concepts designate issues with a high degree of unknown, and for which important design efforts are needed to develop solutions, rather than well-defined activities. An example would be 'Tackling banking exclusion'.

The document-based study was completed with interviews we conducted with three former executives of La Poste: a former CEO who held its position from 2002 to 2013; a former Deputy CEO in charge of strategy, innovation and international development; a former Assistant CEO in charge of strategy, judicial affairs and regulation. These semi-directive interviews were about an hour-and-a-half long and aimed at understanding the conception dynamics behind La Poste's services' expansion. The questions we asked regarded the description of La Poste's conception activities, namely, the identification of actors involved in creating new services, the types of knowledge produced to create these services as well as the difficulties encountered in inventing new solutions to achieve their public service missions.

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Step 2: Exploring La Poste's systematic effort to regenerate its goals and commitments

The second step of our research consists of exploring the mechanisms employed by La Poste's members to innovate in order to enrich the organization's solutions catalogue that serve its purpose. In particular, we wonder if these mechanisms fall within a specific institutional logic, or if they lead to an evolution of the institutional logics.

To do so, we chose to work with the Societal Commitment Department (SCD) of La Poste. Although this department was recently created – in July 2017 – its work builds on the former Corporate Social Responsibility Department. The name of this new department does appear significant, as it re-introduces the notion of commitment, and translates the department's mission to expand its impact beyond traditional CSR politics. Indeed, the Department's Director's does not simply look for La Poste to launch social and environmental initiatives that only concern industrial processes within the company. She envisions a transformative role that La Poste could endorse, by initiating innovative solutions to great societal issues.

However, it has been made clear that all of the social missions conducted by the Department must either be sustainable or contribute to the group's overall profitability. Therefore, because of its social mission and its confrontation to the profitability issue, the Department must deal with apparently conflicting discourses: as one logic urges them to find new ways to ensure a public interest mission, another encourages them to only come up with new profitable services - this profitability, however, contradicts the representation that actors possess of public service, which is precisely to produce essential and non-profitable services. As the Department's members are faced with this contradiction, we think it constitutes a good locus to analyze how la Poste is dealing with this duality.

Members of the department carry out various activities, such as: communication-related missions, forecasting studies (research missions aimed at acquiring knowledge), prototyping new societal initiatives and mobilizing potential employees or partners on societal issues.

The department has launched a few projects, such as the conception of a package destined to postal workers in order to increase their interest in the societal role of La Poste, and encourage them to initiate societal projects in their day-to-day lives. Another on-going project is the instalment of urban agriculture structures on roofs of La Poste buildings. This project is still at a proto-typing stage, and aims at contributing to the ecological transition effort as well as offering career opportunities for postal employees.

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Besides initiating its own projects, the Department undertakes a work of mapping various initiatives of societal nature taking place at La Poste. Namely, they conduct an effort of finding projects that represent exemplar cases of initiatives they wish to replicate and eventually implement on a systematic basis. This indicates that the SCD holds a broader and specific role, that we will be trying to describe and elucidate through our research. In order to understand the desired specificities of projects by the SCD, we also chose to focus on two of these projects that were selected as 'exemplar cases' and are closely followed by the SCD: a 'Paper Recycling' project and a 'Rural Grocery Store' project. 'Paper Recycling' is an office waste collecting service. 'Rural Grocery Store' is a multi-service chain of grocery stores implemented in rural areas. These two projects were chosen as they differ in several ways. First, they address two very different issues: 'Paper Recycling' aims at increasing the recycling rate of waste on the French territory, which appears to only be loosely linked to La Poste's historical activity and purpose. On the contrary, 'Rural Grocery Store''s mission to 'revitalize the rural world' does fall in line with La Poste's central mission of maintaining a cohesion on the French territory. Secondly, 'Paper Recycling' is at a far more advanced stage of conception: created in 2008, the concept has been operational for several years and has led to the creation of a joint-venture with a leading recycling operator. On the contrary, 'Rural Grocery Store''s creation is quite recent, as the implementation of the first grocery store took place in 2016.

By investigating both the SCD's activities and the conception itinerary of the selected projects, we wish to describe the processes by which La Poste regenerates its activities in order to serve its purpose.

Data collection and analysis

The data we base our analysis on was gathered through interviews with both the Societal Commitment Department's team and specific projects' managers. More specifically, we conducted three interviews with the permanent members of the department, that lasted about an hour and a half. They aimed at understanding the nature of the work carried out by the Department, the types of discourses they receive from other employees, their representation of La Poste's stakes, as well as their role in contributing to the company's general purpose. We also interviewed three employees who were or currently are involved in the two specific projects we selected, so as to retrace their conception itinerary. The discussion, that lasted about one hour each, was then led to obtain information about: the original objectives of the

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initiative, the experimentations that were led, the knowledge that was acquired or developed during this conception effort and the types of actors involved in this undertaking.

In addition to these interviews, we were provided with document sources. On the one hand, we examined the SCD's strategy presentations to the Executive Committee as well as SCD employees' roadmaps. On the other, we looked into the two projects' communication documents, which gave us confirmation of events recounted by actors and provided additional details about their conception.

3. FINDINGS

We present in this section our results on Step 1 – Analyzing La Poste's purpose formulation – On Step 1, we present our analysis of the evolution of the four public service missions of La Poste. On Step 2 – Exploring La Poste's systematic effort to regenerate its goals and commitments, we are able to draw on the analysis of one of our two projects – 'Paper Recycling' – to identify conception patterns aimed at serving La Poste's purpose.

STEP 1: ANALYZING LA POSTE'S PURPOSE FORMULATION

As mentioned in our methodological protocol, we studied all seven former and current planning contracts concluded between La Poste and the State. We looked for the generative dimension of the purpose by taking note of the mention of new services (or concepts) in the sections detailing the four public service missions of La Poste. All of these four missions encapsulate La Poste's broader purpose. Their original formulations are:

- Mission 1: to provide the universal postal service
- Mission 2: to convey and deliver the press
- Mission 3: to ensure access to banking services
- Mission 4: to contribute to territorial planning and development.

We present a synthesis of ours results for each of the four missions on the four diagrams below [Figure 1] [Figure 2] [Figure 3] and [Figure 4]. As mentioned in our methodological section, we have counted and ranked all concepts according to their degree of generativity. We then proceeded to a visual representation of this modeling for each mission. Each blue dot represents a concept found in the corresponding contract. The concepts were then placed on a scale representing the level of generativity.

Figure 1 – Concepts related to Mission 1) To provide the universal postal service
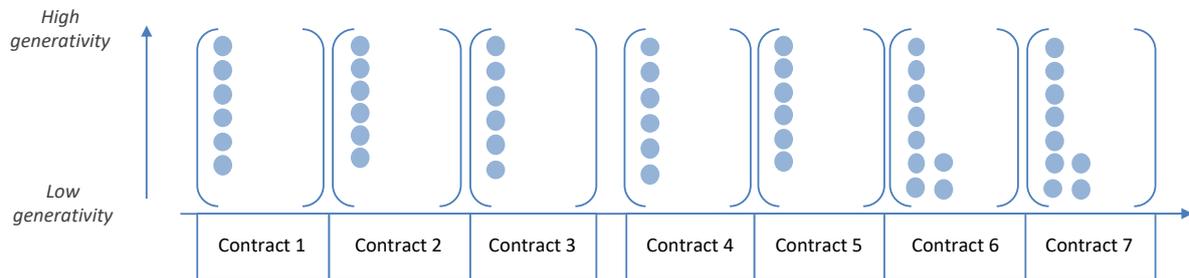

**Figure 2 – Concepts related to Mission 2) To convey and deliver the press**
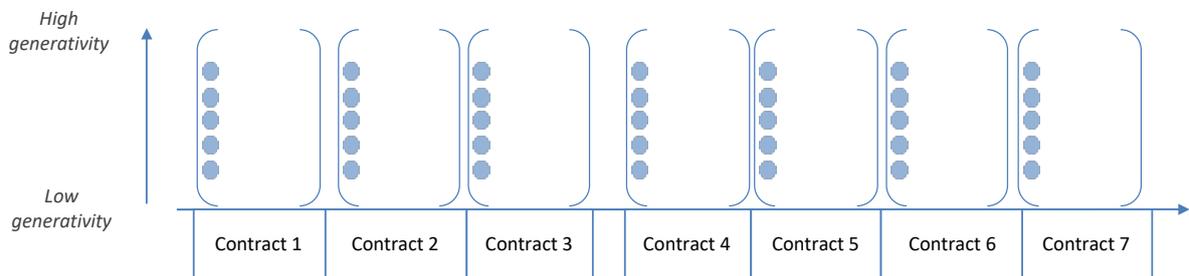
As the diagrams indicate, Missions 1 and 2 have not been greatly enriched with new concepts between 1991 and 2018. The content of their definition has been relatively stable, with the conditions of their execution only slightly evolving.

Figure 3 – Concepts related to Mission 3) To ensure access to banking services
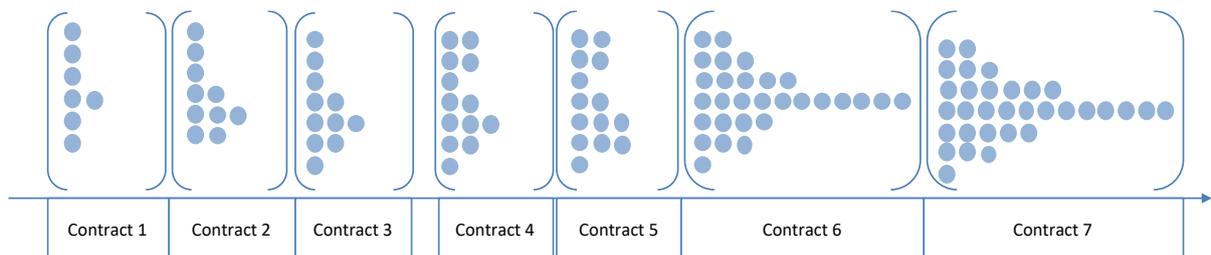
On the contrary, Mission 3 has seen the multiplication of its concepts, and has significantly expanded over the time of the seven contracts. Among the new generative concepts, we can mention the issue of tackling over-indebtedness, financial fragility and banking exclusion.

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Figure 4 – Concepts related to Mission 4) To contribute to territorial planning and development.

| Contract 1 | Contract 2 | Contract 3 | Contract 4 | Contract 5 | Contract 6 | Contract 7 |
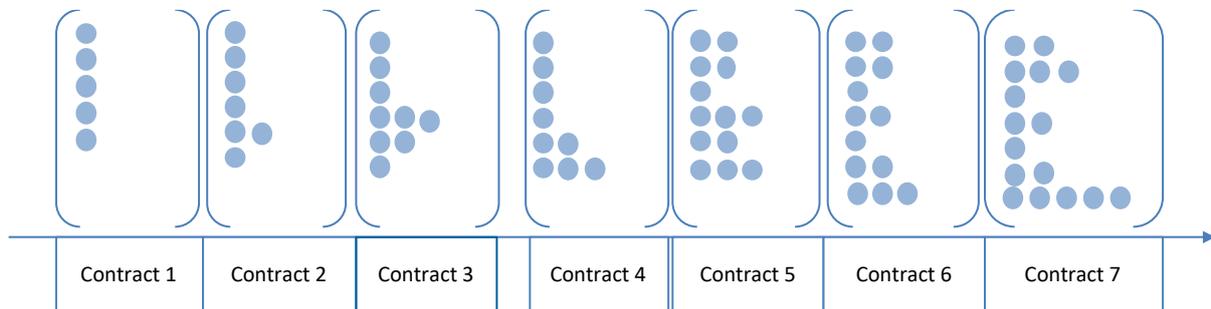
Mission 4 has also expanded as La Poste's members and stakeholders have defined a governance framework which has led to the definition of numerous new forms of territorial presence, as well as new objectives to tackle, such as addressing the issue of the digital divide.

To conclude, we assessed numerous generative concepts emerging over the years related to Missions 3 and 4. These designate unknown solutions that subsequently become innovative services by La Poste, such as the creation of a banking mediation platform by its Banking entity. Because these new concepts require innovation efforts, they in turn called for the development and acquisition of new bodies of knowledge by members of the organization, such as knowledge on the processes of over-indebtedness of fragile populations, and the development of new practices that are needed to tackle these issues. We also argue that by continuously introducing new concepts into the formulation of the public service missions, La Poste has enriched the definition and representation its purpose – ensuring cohesion of the territory. It appears that the comprehension of the purpose itself is regularly updated to match the evolving social and environmental challenges that La Poste might be able to characterize, such as the digital divide, during the course of its activities.

STEP 2: EXPLORING LA POSTE'S SYSTEMATIC EFFORT TO REGENERATE ITS GOALS AND COMMITMENTS

In this section, we present preliminary identified patterns of conception that serve La Poste's purpose, and explain how they embody an effort to revise the goals and commitments

formulated by the company. We base these findings on the conception history of the 'Paper Recycling' project.

We retraced the project's genealogy as well as the history of its conception itinerary. We only present here a brief summary of this history. The 'Paper Recycling' project was actually initiated by a small waste collection and sorting company, back in 2008. This company was looking to tackle the low recycling rate in the department of Yvelines, France. Its founders thought La Poste had a unique infrastructure that enabled them to undertake the collection of paper waste produced by middle-sized offices. The founders then approached the local team of La Poste to suggest they could take on this new activity. This sparked a conception effort led by La Poste, so as to invent a service that would be profitable, accepted by postmen, easily integrable to existing logistics processes and that would ensure clients' members confidentiality. Through this preliminary study of 'Paper Recycling', we have observed La Poste does not only seek to maintain institutional logics. Rather, the company engages in innovation efforts to conceive services that are consistent with its institutional logics, but also intend to overcome the conflict between them.

First of all, La Poste reaches to actors outside of its traditional industrial sectors to invent new services. This way, the company builds on innovations that link the traditional postal activity to new 'dimensions'. In the case of 'Paper Recycling', they were able to link the logistics aspect of postal delivery with the recycling sector, to conceive a service that performed a new waste collecting function.

Secondly, La Poste conceives new services in order to make them coherent with several institutional demands. Indeed, 'Paper Recycling' was the result of a conception process that looked to meet the expectations formulated by various actors. 'Paper Recycling' had to be profitable, hence the selection of a valuable waste, such as paper, and the request to define a service that would not require additional investment by the company. The project also had to be approved by Postmen, since they were the members in charge of the operational execution of the service. Postmen had some expectations about the service: the nature of the handled waste had to remain coherent with their core activity. In this regard, paper waste was preferred over other types of collectable waste. 'Paper Recycling' also had to be designed in order to be in conformity with the French and European regulation. We can conclude that the Societal Commitment Department must make sure, as the new concepts build bridges with new stakeholders, that they are in conformity with all of their demands or claims.

Moreover, the company appears to be able to formulate a new commitment only if the identified 'links' with these various logics all seem be coherent with La Poste's perceived identity. The project had to meet the demands of new stakeholders while still complying with the commitments that already tied the company, in particular towards the State, both as a shareholder and as a client compensating La Poste for the execution of its four public service missions. As we mentioned, 'Paper Recycling' had to be accepted by the postmen as they are the operational hand of this conceived service. The new activity therefore had to be compatible with their representation of La Poste as a public interest company. It then had to be relevant in regard to local economic development problematics as well as the environmental impacts. To meet these constraints, short distribution circuits were conceived, with the choice of delivering the waste to local clients and abandoning potential ones located in China – even though the latter were offering higher prices for the good.

Lastly, by explicating the links La Poste is able to tie with other professions or fields, the department uncovers new variations of La Poste's purpose. In this sense, the SCD appears to be a place of exploration of its future commitments. Indeed, the issues tackled by services such as 'Paper Recycling' were not addressed by its preexisting services. This means that through this project, La Poste has redefined its understanding of its purpose, and more specifically of the concept of 'cohesion'. Previously referring to situations of exclusion (in regard to the location on the territory or to the financial situation of its beneficiaries), 'cohesion' now seems to comprise the notion of solidarity between generations. 'Paper Recycling' is in fact a project that contributes to ensuring the preservation of natural resources on the territory, for future generations to come.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION: THE PURPOSE AND THE DELIBERATE RENEWAL OF INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS

To begin with, we believe that analyzing the generative dimension of a PPC's purpose was particularly rewarding. Our study of La Poste's purpose gives us a few indications of the effects of its (re)formulations. We have observed that one PPC can define its purpose in more or less generative terms, as it introduces concepts that are more or less conceived and specified. When the purpose includes to designation of generative concepts, the PPC commits to delivering a product or service that is still unknown. The dynamics engendered by such a

commitment are not described by the existing literature. We therefore believe that our hypothesis and analysis process were quite fruitful.

To begin with, our research enriches the theory of PPCs. The purpose, if generative does not fixate the institutional logics at play within the company. On the contrary, it can be conceived as a tool to regularly renew its interpretation of the purpose to keep up with the social or environmental stakes that are related to it. In this way, the purpose does not seem to institutionalize an identity, with fixed values and prescriptions for action. Instead, the purpose appears as a lever for renewing the identity and institutional logics in the company. In this sense, we can conclude that an open and generative purpose leads to a continued regeneration of the institutional dynamics of a PPC. We can draw from these results implications in terms of governance of PPCs: from an accountability point of view, the control and monitoring must not only evaluate the achievements, but also the capacity of the organization to broaden its own understanding of the purpose, and its objectives accordingly.

Secondly, these results contribute to the literature on dynamics of institutional logics and fields. Indeed, previous work described the process of shifts from one logic to another, or the construction of logics building from new knowledge and tools, new concepts. We have here intended to expose the upstream work that results in the construction of new logics. Namely, we have highlighted how a purpose can drive the organization itself to formulate new concepts that call for the development of new bodies of knowledge, new cognitive frameworks and new practices.

We have observed that a generative purpose can encourage a PPC to actively explore new institutional fields, where the purpose has not yet been of use. Indeed, on Step 2, we were able to show that La Poste does not settle into traditional responses to institutional logics duality. Indeed, we argue that the initiatives followed by the Societal Commitment Department do not translate to responses that were accounted by the literature (Kraatz and Block, 2008). On the contrary, they seek to engage in a new and original mechanism. Through the example of 'Paper Recycling', we have demonstrated that members of La Poste were able to borrow knowledge bodies from other institutional fields (D'Aunno et al., 1991). This knowledge was then interpreted in such a way to add layers to the core concepts of the PPC's purpose – 'cohesion', 'population' or 'territory'. The use of this knowledge allowed to switch from one representation of these concepts to another. This new representation later led to the

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formulation of new generative concepts, that is, issues that require investigation to be solved. Because they call for the definition of new actors, new knowledge and the conception of new practices to actually take form, we argue that these new concepts are designating new institutional fields to be constructed, and awaiting the shaping of new institutional logics (Thornton et al., 2012). By incorporating new knowledge originating from other fields, La Poste was able to re-interpret its purpose and shape new logics and objectives, while still preserving the core concepts of its commitment.

Finally, they contribute to the research on hybrid organizations. Whereas the literature on hybrid shows that the creation of a concept – that later builds into a logic or an identity – is a possible way of managing hybridity, we have found that another, yet uncovered, alternative is possible. Through the commitment on a generative purpose, hybrids can indeed formulate new concepts that call for the fabrication of new logics, thus renewing the practices at play in the organization. With regard to our research question, it thus appears that a purpose can be both established and generative. In this case, the commitment formulated by the company does not contribute to establishing one institutional logic. Instead, it contributes to institutionalize a renewal of institutional logics. More specifically, a generative purpose does not stabilize a cognitive framework that would be derived from a specific institutional order, as the purpose does not appear to institutionalize particular practices. Rather, the generative purpose introduces a dynamic into its institutional environment. Therefore, the generative nature of the purpose does not only lead to enrich the specifications' requirements formulated by the State. It also introduces new unknown concepts that call for innovation efforts from La Poste in order to be conceived. These new concepts encourage La Poste to continually acquire new knowledge, which in turn provides potential new cognitive frameworks for actors. This renewal of cognitive mindsets produces new practices on a regular basis, which constitute parts of new institutional logics. In this sense, we believe that this observation provides a new insight on hybrid organizing. Indeed, previous authors have analyzed how actors differentiate or integrate conflictual institutional logics (Battilana et al., 2017), sometimes by constructing their own identity (Kraatz and Block, 2008, Battilana and Dorado, 2010). These strategic responses suggested that hybrids tend to stabilize their institutional demands to be sustainable. On the contrary, our case study indicates that purpose-driven hybrids can renew their institutional logics on a systematic basic and be sustainable.

The notion of 'field construction' echoes the concept of institutional field emergence (Lawrence and Phillips, 2004). However, in the latter framework, entrepreneurs are able to conduct their initiative thanks to preexisting 'building blocks' that are constituted by macro-level discourses that legitimate their actions. On the contrary, La Poste's purpose aims at deliberately regenerating these discourses by providing new concepts. Once formulated, these concepts can be tackled by La Poste themselves or by other institutional entrepreneurs. These will hence have to invent the practices and logics that will give substance to the designated concepts. To contribute further to the literature on institutional logics, we intend to show, in a later step, how La Poste has been able to pilot the emergence of these new actors.

Finally, we make the following assumption regarding La Poste's identity: by continuously reformulating its purpose, members induce a regular revision of what are the central and distinctive features of its identity (Gioia et al., 2013). If so, La Poste could therefore contribute to the emergence of new institutions by precisely revising its own identity (Glynn, 2017). However, this discussion will have to be enriched by a further investigation of the concept of identity.

Our future research will consist in best understanding and describing the 'links' we refer to: we will have the characterize how La Poste is exploring the connections they are able to articulate with insider and outsider institutional logics. How is La Poste able to conceive new services that are consistent with its DNA and that extend its purpose at the same time? It seems particularly relevant to study in the future how PPCs are able to preserve and to enlarge their purpose on the long term. Lastly, we believe it would also be interesting to study the new PPCs – companies having adopted PPC legal statutes – with this same analytical framework: how do they formulate their purpose? Can it generate new unknown concepts? Are they seeking to designate new institutional logics to be constructed?

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